

AFTER THE CROSSROADS: NEO-LIBERAL GLOBALIZATION,
DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION, AND PROGRESSIVE URBAN COMMUNITY
ACTIVISM IN SOUTH KOREA

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of Sociology
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

March 2013

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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March 2013

Title: After the Crossroads: Neo-liberal Globalization, Democratic Transition, and Progressive Urban Community Activism in South Korea.

The main purpose of this study is to understand the historicity of the dynamics of socio-economic changes and the characteristics of social and political mobilization in the case of progressive activists' ongoing search for new strategies of progressive urban community politics in Seoul, South Korea, after the historical conjuncture of democratization and neo-liberal globalization. This study is conducted through participant observation, interviews, and post-fieldwork historical research. By adopting the concept of "multiple-layeredness" as the underlying perspective, this study aims to capture the complexity and hybridity of past and recent socio-economic transformations. The progressive community activists are products of historically specific circumstances of state repression and radical social movements in the 1980s and the 1990s, and the influences of their past activist experiences are visible in their community activism. Historically, the state has been implicated in popular mobilizations for the national goals of economic development and democratization, which resulted in two-party domination in local politics. Under this unfavorable political condition, the community activists seek to acquire their places in public institutions through local elections and to organize grassroots resistance against local "growth machines" by mobilizing various social ties.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wanted to be a journalist when I was a middle school boy. Something I did not understand was happening at the time and I wanted to know more about it than what appeared in the media. People, mostly university students, started to protest on the street. It was something that had not happened in my conservative hometown as far as I could remember. The smell of tear gas became a thing that did not surprise anyone. On Sundays, I could see scattered debris of pavement bricks thrown to police in the downtown the previous days. That life lasted for a month or so. On one day towards the end of June, the ruling party's next presidential candidate had a press conference and conceded to the people's demands. Later, I became aware that the whole process was the historic June Resistance in 1987. After the concession, everybody including middle-schoolers like me started to talk about politics. My then-liberal parents managed to convince me that our opposition leaders would change the country, which unfortunately did not happen in the same way as I had imagined.

I wanted to study sociology in a university when I was a high school student. For some reasons I do not quite recall, I thought that I could become an engineer of society, pretty much analogous to an engineer of machines. I was lucky enough to be qualified for sociology major in one of the prestigious universities in Seoul, South Korea. Studying sociology, however, did not make me an activist by any sense of the word. Slowly, I drifted away from the dream to be a social "engineer" as I became more familiar with the discipline.

Upon the graduation, I wanted to be a sociologist because of the "electricity" sparking inside when studying. Since I became a graduate student for that reason, however,

I found it uncomfortable answering questions from outsiders such as what sociology is and what its practical utilities are. Uncomfortable not only because I did not feel I gave them one of the best answers available but also because the questions remind me of the dream I gave up long ago.

A part of the dissertation writing was to ask the same questions to me. What have I been able to change in the world? Sometimes, the question quite distressed me. In the course of the writing, however, I came to a realization that I have been able to change myself and will be able to others do the same if they want to. Whatever little significance the realization may have, it is a good enough reason for me now as a fledgling sociology scholar to express my gratitude to some of those who have helped me along the course of my transformation.

First and foremost, I have to thank Heejin, and my and her parents for all the support and encouragement through this whole process. Thank you also to my committee, Greg McLauchlan, Michael Dreiling, Linda Fuller, Eileen Otis, and Tuong Vu for the work you put in to get me to this point. Especially, Greg provided me with a lot of brilliant insights while reading this dissertation in bits and pieces. Thank you to Wes Shirley for your immense support here in Eugene. Thanks to Julianne Han for your help with editing. And thanks to the office staff in sociology, Chris Blum, Shelley Carlson, and Elizabeth Milner for always having the answers I needed.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1. Questions

The main purpose of this study is to understand the historicity of the dynamics of structure and agency in the case of leftist activists' ongoing search for new strategies of progressive urban community politics in Seoul, South Korea which has undergone neo-liberal globalization and democratization for the last two decades. Theoretically, this study aims to enrich sociological understanding on the relationship between socio-economic changes and the characteristics of social and political mobilization. Empirically, I hope to enhance our understanding of the changing contours of South Korean progressive politics after the historical conjuncture of democratization and neo-liberal globalization.

(1) Sociological Context

What are the relationships between socio-economic changes and social and political mobilization? As in Karl Marx's often cited phrases (1978[1852]: 595), people make their own history, but not under circumstances of their own choosing. Along with other social scientists and historians, we sociologists always wonder if human agency is ever strong enough to lift the nightmarish weight of the dead. On the one hand, structuralists argue that given structural arrangements ultimately determine social and political outcomes. From a Marxian perspective, Nicos Poulantzas (1973) insists that structural contradiction inherent in capitalism and struggles among class factions conditioned by the given mode

of production in socio-economic formation determine political dynamics, at least in the last instance. Similarly, from a Weberian tradition, Theda Skocpol (1979) asserts that revolutions are not made by revolutionaries' hands, but come as a result of various combinations of structural circumstances. On the other, E. P. Thompson (1963) argues that social and political conflicts are processes where historical agents themselves come into being. In other words, class struggle is not the result of structurally pre-determined antagonistic actors. To the contrary, only through human agency do actors make sense of who they are (why they are antagonistic to each other) and what they are doing. This perspective has been pushed further especially after the linguistic turn and subsequent cultural turns in human and social sciences. Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt argue that "objectivist" social science was put to severe tests after the growing realization that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (Geertz 1973: 5; Bonnell and Hunt 1999: 3). In a similar vein, Margaret Somers (1997) goes so far as to dismiss more structurally oriented class formation theories as "denarrativized" narratives based on a nineteenth century naturalist epistemology. According to her, for example, the theoretical conundrum of the existence of countless particularities in various historical trajectories of working class formation, in fact, became a conundrum precisely because of the historical particularity of the theories on working class formation; one of the manifestations of the particularity of the theories is, above all, the idea that a certain universal path has been presumed to exist. Instead of judging working people's actions through the yardsticks of *our* (academicians') narratives about the emergence of modern industrial society, she suggests, we need to look at working people's identity formation from *their* stories.

In either case, however, the answers are partial. Large scale socio-economic change occurs and affects social and political mobilization even when it is not clearly articulated by actors in conflicts. At the same time, the nature of a specific conflict cannot be directly deduced from the socio-economic change because the unfolding of the conflict is contingent on the ways change is summoned into social narrative(s) of the actors. The implication of this seemingly banal observation is more puzzling than it looks because it does appear to be that, albeit all the talks on historical particularity, there exist universal paths, if not the path, of historical developments of society. According to the prevailing social scientific imagery of social and political movements, a certain social change necessarily entails a corresponding social and political mobilization. Marxist thoughts on social and political movements in the previous century well exemplify this imagery.

Historically speaking, it can be said that the left had one “correct” answer to all the ills of the contemporary world until the early 1970s: the abolition of the capitalist mode of production. It was thought that social problems such as economic inequality, gender inequality, race inequality, military conflicts and so on had their indelible roots in the contradictions of capitalism. As capitalist trends deepened, we would see an inevitable ascendance of anti-capitalism movements. The only caution the left had to bear in mind was to avoid the fallacies of this or that deviation of the original Marxism, the meaning of which was different depending on one’s position on which subsequent development was preserving the rational kernel of the “original” Marxism. The period of the late 1960s and the early 1970s was marked by political turmoil, the meaning of which can be interpreted as either the culmination of the old left’s one “correct” answer or the

birth of doubtful new left, or maybe both. After this tumultuous era, the persuasiveness of the left continuously declined until the final death knell of the historic collapse of the Eastern Block at the turn of the 1990s. Although the old Marxist strategy was declining, the social scientific imagery on the relationship between social change and social and political movements has remained intact. That is, changes in social and political contentions are still explained in terms of socio-economic changes. Ironically, the very scientific imagery which predicts the inevitable triumph of socialism explains the worldwide decline of Marxist revolutionary contentions this time around. For example, it is often suggested that a new capitalist accumulation regime often dubbed as post-Fordism can explain the decline of the old left and the rise of the new social movements, as George Steinmetz (1994) argues in his critical examination on regulation theory. Even though we can generally admit the historical (or empirical) plausibility of the causal connection between the rise of post-industrial (post-modern) society and new social movements, the connection is at best tenuous,¹ and is in need of more rigorous theoretical and empirical scrutiny.

In this theoretical context, this study aims to inquire into the historicity of such relationships. Can such relationships be understood without succumbing to the theoretical presupposition of universal paths? Why is causality between socio-economic change and socio-political contention assumed if human agency is indeed capable of “spinning” countless possibilities of historical developments?

¹ George Steinmetz (2005: 294, 311) seems to prefer “resonance” to describe this tenuous nature in his discussion on this historical developments of sociology in the post-WWII US.

(2) Historical Context: South Korean Radicalism as an Ideology of a Bygone Era?

Viewed from the prevailing theoretical narrative of a linear advance of society from pre-modern agrarian to modern industrial to post-modern informational, South Korean progressive social and political movements have apparently followed the patterns of those in the countries that industrialized earlier; countless peasants rose up and fought against the agrarian socio-economic regimes; during the industrialization, militant labor movements periodically arose; and recently, grass-roots organizations with various objectives such as environmentalism and community activism seem to be proliferating. It should be noted, however, that such an apparent universality cannot be understood without a certain level of deviation taken into consideration. First of all, the time period when South Korean activists picked up orthodox Marxism is interesting. What did the South Korean activists have in mind when they introduced Marxist perspectives into their social and political contentions in that period when the very Marxist strategies were being increasingly questioned in other parts of the world? After the decimation of the radical left in South Korea around the years of the Korean War (1950-53) (Cumings 1981), the late 1970s was the period when South Korean left (re)discovered the validity of the old left's one "correct" answer: an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist revolution. It can be said that this radical political ideology has largely three strands: radical democracy, socialism, and populist nationalism. From the late 1960s, some intellectuals started to put the miserable life conditions of ordinary working people into their discourses. Typical stories from this era included loss of agricultural land, migration to industrial cities, lack of job opportunities, long working hours, inequitable remuneration, human rights abuses, evictions from tenant housing and so on. They claimed that the sources of the misery

were military dictatorship which deprived the people of basic human rights, a capitalist mode of production which destroyed people's means of basic subsistence and an American imperial dominance which supported the previous two evils of the military dictatorship and capitalism, and which caused the Korean and the Cold War devastation of the Korean Peninsula. Numerous political factions arose according to their relative emphasis on these three factors, and yet they maintained a united front against the authoritarian state. The various but united South Korean radical movements called themselves *minjung*² (literally, ordinary people or mass and, by implication, the underprivileged) or *minjok minju* (literally, national democratic) movements. It should be noted that the movements were cultural as well as material. The naming suggests that their struggles were not only about gaining more material benefits of rapid industrialization, but also about creating positive images of South Korean working people as ultimate producers of South Korean historical fates, under what Nancy Abelmann (1996) calls *minjung* imagery.³

Another interesting aspect of the South Korean radicalism is its resilience. Perhaps thanks to South Korean activists' ability to maintain a strong united front, South Korea remained a bastion of radical activism for decades in the face of unfavorable ideological conditions and a vast power disparity among social classes. The *minjung* movements in the 1980s and the 1990s largely were understood to consist of three prime actors: workers, farmers, and urban poor. Radical farmers' organizations were mobilized against a series of governmental attempts to open agricultural markets to foreign imports,

² This study generally follows the rules of the "Revised Romanization of Korean" promoted by South Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism except some Korean terminologies and names such as *chaebol* already in wide scholarly uses in the Anglophone world.

³ Additional discussions on the *minjung* radicalism can be found in Chapter III and V.

as the government attempted to comply with several multi- and bi-lateral trade agreements. Labor unions fiercely resisted, with militant strikes, attempts to make the labor market more flexible throughout 1990s, until the Asian currency crisis in 1997 when they were forced to accept massive layoffs of workers. Urban street vendors organized themselves to claim their rights to do their business without government repression. Poor residential as well as commercial renters demanded alternative residential facilities and equitable compensation for their loss of income and investment during urban rehabilitation projects. These persistent struggles also facilitated political mobilizations. The progressive Democratic Labor Party (*Minjunodongdang*; DLP), founded in 2001 based on exclusive supports from the militant Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (*Jeonguk Minjunodongjohap Chong-yeonmaeng* or *Minjunochong* in short; KCTU), got 10 (out of 299) congressional seats in the 2004 general election for the first time as a leftist political party since the 1961 military coup.

Perhaps even more puzzling is the fact that in the middle of neo-liberal market fundamentalism being widely discredited after the financial meltdown in the US in 2008, the successful march of South Korean progressive movements came to a halt. They even found themselves in crisis less than a decade after Hagen Koo (2001), a prominent scholar on South Korean labor movement, stated that the South Korean workers' movement stood at a crossroads. After the current conservative government came into office in 2008, ending a decade of liberal Democratic rule, it became clear that the moral and practical leaderships of the radical KCTU is being questioned by workers and other factions of political progressives after a series of ineffectual general strikes over issues of Free Trade Agreements and "flexible" employment. The progressive parties' number of

the congressional seats was sliced in half to five after the split of the DLP which could not resolve factional disputes largely resulting from an ineffectual 2007 presidential campaign. This recent decline is all the more painful for the left because progressive politics is nearly absent when it is needed most. The South Korean government, which was generally oriented toward neoliberal economic policies, is turning into what James Galbraith (2008) calls a “predator state” after Lee Myung Bak of the conservative Grand National Party (*Hannaradang*; GNP) was elected as President in 2007. Their actual policies betray their constant claim of centrist pragmatism. They implemented tax-cuts for the wealthy, eliminated important regulations of the financial industry, cut welfare expenditures, were largely reluctant to curb a proliferation of short-term employments and started questionable construction projects such as four major river revamping projects which are thought to be environmentally harmful by many domestic and foreign experts. Under the circumstance of low economic growth, largely caused by the world-wide financial crisis, South Korea has been sustained by increased debt levels in the public as well as private sectors while wealth has been increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few: A South Korean version of the all too familiar privatization of the national treasury, the prototype of which is witnessed in the US (Klein 2007; Galbraith 2008). In addition, their hawkish policies towards North Korea have destroyed the always fragile political rapport between the North and South and regional political and military stability with it. These situations press us to ask why the South Korean left has become even more marginal when the possibilities of utilizing political and economic circumstances to their advantage were virtually ubiquitous.

It is often the case that social movements tend to become the victims of their own success. Successful unconventional political contentions tend to make their way into conventional politics, and this yields situations where a co-opted and rigid leadership ignores demands from the bottom. Certainly, the gradual transition from military dictatorship to formal democracy in South Korea (1987-2002), which is itself partly the result of radical movements, provided these movements with political space inside formal politics. And their engagements with formal politics entailed the decline of radical ideologies. The imagery of radical “people’s movements,” with ordinary working people both as victims and as the real protagonists of South Korean history outside formal institutional politics, has lost its persuasiveness. In the left’s political lexicon, the unifying concept of *minjung* has been largely replaced by a more benign term of *seomin* which has the same literal meaning but does not signify political radicalism. Are the South Korean radical social movements following the usual trajectory of the domestication of radicalism?

To the contrary, many liberal and conservative observers are wasting no time to point out that the left’s out-dated militant attitudes towards formal politics are the very cause of their decline. Kim and Lim (2000) argue that militant labor unions’ lack of capability to engage flexibly in dialogue with employers and the state prevented labor from becoming relevant in the process of labor law reforms in the mid-1990s. Even some sympathetic observers such as Namhee Lee (2007) argue that South Korean radicalism may be effective under authoritarian military regimes, but is too rigid to come up with practical policy alternatives in more democratic settings. In fact, many middle class progressives have withdrawn their support for radical social and political movements to

be members of more benign “citizens’ movements” as their standard of living significantly improved. Many former radical activists became insiders of formal politics as liberal or even conservative politicians. These portrayals of South Korean radicalism as too rigid and too militant or too outdated in part reflect how liberals and conservatives conceptualize the South Korean transition to democracy. In numerous studies on the South Korean democratic transition, democracy usually means freedom of speech and association, and free and fair elections which is usually followed by the weakening of the state’s coercive interventions into civil society (e.g. Kim, Sunhyuk 2003; Seong 2000). In this framework, the traditional radical left is usually classified as parochial interest groups as opposed to publicly minded voluntary associations such as anti-corruption and environmental associations. Once framed in this way, radical social movements were forced into an unsavory choice between pursuing more practical goals as interest groups, or anachronistically engaging in revolutionary activism. This view is typically expressed when liberal and conservative scholars discuss the neo-liberal transformation during the Asian currency crisis under the Democratic Kim Dae Jung administration. These scholars (e.g. Kim, Byung-Kook 2000; Moon and Kim 2000) begin their discussions with the theoretical frame of whether democracy is harmful or beneficial to economy. In the course of their discussions, political claims from the radical left are usually treated as obstacles a democratic government should overcome.

Whatever the reason for the decline of the left might be, an important fact is that their political relevance has been on the line for quite a while. And, more importantly, leftist activists are keenly aware of this political impasse. Then, what were they to do to once again be a politically relevant force? It seems that one of the left’s central agendas

has been countering neo-liberalism since the Asian economic crisis in 1997. The term neo-liberalism is one of the most frequently mentioned in leftist discourses in South Korea. It has been used when they express discontent against Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), privatization of publicly owned companies, the proliferation of temporary jobs and self-employment and anything destabilizing the livelihood of working people in the name of the free market. According to the left's discourses, South Korean working people are victims of the seemingly uncontrollable volatility of global financial processes. But, what did they specifically do using this very broad term?

What is the significance of community activism in these historical contexts? Does community activism signify that South Korean social movements are adapting to a post-industrial society as, in Seoul, service sector workers replace manufacturing workers (Shin, Kwang-Yeong 2004: 189, 192-3)? In a sense, community activism seems to be a response to the recent economic and political changes we have examined above. During the preliminary research for this study, one community activist told me that he was pursuing two broad (short-term and long-term) political objectives through community activism.⁴ The short term objective is building a coalition against the conservative ruling party. It is not surprising to see politically weak parties seeking alliances especially when a ruling party relentlessly pushes their political agenda with increasingly authoritarian methods, although historically such attempts of coalition building have not been very successful.

In the sense that the short term solution of political alliance building may not drastically improve their status as a very small minority which renders them politically

⁴ An informal interview with In-Ho whom we meet later, held during the preliminary research in 2009.

irrelevant, a long term solution to mobilize victims of neo-liberal policies into supporters of progressive politics needs to be considered. The long term objective is to make progressive politics take root in urban communities. Why are they focusing on urban communities in an increasingly globalized world? The apparent rationales are (1) to shore up ordinary working people's defense mechanism against ceaseless tides of neo-liberalization by creating spaces not directly affected by the predatory nature of market mechanisms, and (2) to create a more stable political base so that they can prevent their political fate from solely hinging on political whim of unorganized voters especially when assaults on the left are escalated. These responses seem to be natural reactions to the overall political and economic changes in South Korea.

In another sense, however, increasing community activism seems to be not so much an outcome of a programmed approach as an unforeseen result of sheer serendipity. In the 2002 municipal elections, the DLP got one seat in each of 9 (out of 16) provincial level councils⁵, which was a historic moment because it has been several decades since progressives had had such an almost nation-wide electoral success. The first thing they worried about was what to do with just one seat in each provincial council. In other words, there was no well-established program for progressive local politics largely because they participated in the local election under the simple reasoning that a political party should engage in elections whenever it is possible, leaving elected council members to approach it in an *ad hoc* fashion.⁶ The unpreparedness was partly related to South Koreans' inexperience with local political institutions. In South Korea, local politics

⁵ More detailed descriptions on South Korean administrative and electoral systems can be found in Chapter VI.

⁶ An informal interview held in 2009 with Shim Jae-Ok, the DLP Seoul Metropolitan City Council member from 2002 to 2006.

institutionally was resumed with the implementation of “local self-governance” (*jibangjachiye*) in 1991 after its cessation by the military in 1961. Local self-governance was called for largely under the justification that it symbolized democracy. While the ideal represented the noble cause of democracy, the actuality in the beginning was a nominal level of local authority without supporting fiscal mechanisms (Ahn 2005), and often entailed corruption or political bickering among affluent conservatives (Park 2005). In these conservative-dominated local political situations, the first nationally coordinated effort to engage in local politics from the left were efforts to enact public school lunch program ordinances in 2002. The gist of the ordinance was to supply public school lunch programs with locally grown ingredients. Most of the regional governments were slow to heed public opinions largely favorable to the enactment of the ordinances, but quick to protect food suppliers’ interests. As a response, a petition campaign was initiated by the DLP. The end result was a partial success in that the ordinance was mostly adopted by the regional councils, but without effective implementing mechanisms.⁷ Regardless of the result, the party activists and community activists found that they could impact local politics with just one seat in regional councils, but also realized that there were still many obstacles to overcome in order to make real changes in local politics, including the lack of proactive actions from local administrative bureaucracy and less publicly-minded local conservative politicians. Although an example of a successful combination of formal politics and community activism was established through the school lunch program campaign, it seems to be more reasonable to say that leftist parties, such as the DLP and

⁷ Shim Jae-Ok in the 2009 interview.

New Progressive Party (*Jinbosindang*; NPP) that split from the DLP in 2008, did not have well-established programs of progressive local politics.

The historical conjuncture of democratization and neo-liberal globalization in the past two decades has brought rapid economic, political, and social changes to the lives of South Korean working people, and posed challenges to progressive activists. It seems that the pace of the changes has been a source of much confusion in the progressive politics of South Korea. Even though it is legitimate to put social events in their historical contexts and we are well aware that history is full of unpredictable turns of events, an extreme form of historicism may not be the only explanation for the unpredictable political actions and outcomes of progressive activism, for it is also legitimate and even useful to inquire into what structural conditions facilitate and limit possible historical outcomes of progressive political actions.

In what ways is community activism such as the free school lunch program drive in Seoul, South Korea to be understood? Is community activism to be characterized as a “new” social movement of post-industrial (or post-modern) society? Are the radical resistance movements of the 1980s and 1990s merely things of the past? What does community activism tell us about the general state of South Korean politics, as seen from the ground in this crisis-ridden era?

(3) Research Questions

With these theoretical and empirical questions in mind, this study aims to answer four sets of questions. (1) To what extent are such sweeping theoretical concepts as industrialization and neo-liberal globalization useful in capturing practices on the ground

in South Korea in the first place? Do structural transformations described with such concepts allow different interpretations than our standard discourses on modernization? What can the concepts help us see and what can they not? Do structural changes always imply a certain pre-determined course of human actions? If so, where are the places for politics in a globalizing city of Seoul, South Korea? (2) Who are the community activists? What made them social activists in the first place? How did they devote themselves to community activism? In what ways do their past experiences affect what they do now? (3) What does democracy look like when seen from the ground of community activism? To what extent do academic discourses on the democratic transition in South Korea adequately capture practices on the ground in elections? How do community activists engage in elections? What are the alternative ways to characterize their election campaign repertoires? And, (4) why are community activists still marginal in local politics despite all the work they have done? In what ways, under such marginal conditions, do they find the possibilities of counter-hegemonic mobilization?

2. Literature Review: Urban Transformation and Contentious Mobilization under Neo-liberal Globalization

In this section, we examine existing literature, along with brief theoretical discussions, on neo-liberalization, transformation in urban communities, and social and political movements in the contexts of the previous two. Earlier attempts to define neo-liberalism as a market fundamentalist ideology have been the basis of a structural determinism oriented approach to social and political movements in the era of neo-liberalism (e.g. Moody 1997; Part III in Smith and Feagin [ed.] 1987). In their analysis, emphases have

largely fallen on deindustrialization, flexible labor markets and privatized public space. Although these elements are indeed very important features of the era, and the harmful effects of these changes provoked social and political mobilizations, the structurally oriented approaches tend to oversimplify complex contentious politics. In this section, I argue (1) that the effects of socio-economic changes in the last three decades are by no means confined to these three factors and (2) that although there are many studies which try to carefully describe these complexities, the historical memories of past mobilizations as one of the defining components of any community is in need of theoretical and empirical attention.

At the end of the last book of his world historiography (*the Age of Extremes*), Eric Hobsbawm (1996) observes that the Short Twentieth Century ended with problems with no feasible solutions at our disposal. Existing utopian politics such as socialism and neo-liberalism had proved to be failures, or even disasters. Any utopian politics which, in his view, is largely based on simplified pasts and an “amalgam of slogans and emotion” can turn easily into the darkness of fanatically irrational politics. Now that the first decade of the twenty-first century is over, how do we evaluate his warning written almost two decades ago? Have we not witnessed political and economic frenzy exactly as he anticipated during the years of ever expanding neo-liberalism buttressed by a resurgent “fundamentalist” Right?

Whether we feel the same hopelessness as Hobsbawm did or manage to see a glimpse of hope, it seems certain that we are living in a world of uncertainty where we do not know where we are heading. Perhaps, the uncertainty is the most pressing characteristic of our “post-modern” era as evidenced by declarations from a wide

spectrum ranging from the advertising industry to academia. Equally agreed upon is that neo-liberalism and globalization are major driving forces of social change. But, what kind of uncertainty are we talking about? For some it represents a utopian dream of ever more prosperity especially when we know how to ride the right tides of boom and bust (see Harvey 1990: 333 plate 4.1). For others, it is nothing other than a dystopian nightmare of endless displacement. Although I do not think that either characterization is entirely baseless, it is more fruitful when both seemingly contradictory visions can be understood in the context of the complexity of socio-economic changes.

Neo-liberalism and globalization have been largely understood as rooted in the principles of market fundamentalism advocated by “purist” economists such as Milton Friedman. David Harvey (1990) and William Robinson (2004) commonly argue that a flexible mode of accumulation and global expansion of the chain of production, thanks to a new level of time-space compression, are the driving forces in the world economy. Although it is usually assisted by conservative and liberal governments (Harvey 2005), the process is largely seen as economic rather than political. Naomi Klein (2007) documents the *visible* hands of free market economists and economic institutions such as the World Bank and the political processes of privatization. She argues that the market fundamentalism is at the core of even the numerous coups in the Third World.

Because the neo-liberal globalization is perceived as fundamentally economic, changes with political, social and cultural implications are usually treated as the consequences of the economic processes. Even though Harvey (2005) views neo-liberalism as capitalists’ attempt to restore their pre-Depression era class power, he puts much more emphasis on the subversive effects of these economic processes on social

inequality and displacement, and the crisis of democratic representation in politics. In a similar vein, Robinson goes so far as to claim the existence of a transnational capitalist class. Zygmunt Bauman (2005) argues that the cultural dimension of increasingly volatile living conditions such as tourism is not so clearly distinguishable from the economic process itself. In this regard, Galbraith's insistence (2008) that the American conservatives abandoned free market principles almost as soon as adopting them is rather a lone voice. According to him, free market economics has served as a political alibi rather than the principal reason for a conservative assault on public sectors. President Ronald Reagan, usually viewed as the paragon of market fundamentalism, actually abandoned the "pure" version of free market policies within the first couple of years of his presidency. Since then, free market has been evoked whenever they needed justifiable political rhetoric in order to serve their wealthier constituents.

As though reflecting this consensual perspective on neo-liberalism and globalization as fundamentally economic processes, recent urban studies put their focus on the social and political consequences of economic processes. In her study of three core cities in the world economy, Saskia Sassen (2001) argues that, as neo-liberal globalization deepened, class and spatial polarizations of these cities increased. According to her, what recent economic restructurings mean is that these cities increasingly assume the concentrated functions as financial hubs for investments rather than actual sites of production. This changing function causes a realignment of cities' spatial arrangement into one where there is a prosperous core of the financial sector and its support services. As the results of the realignment, gaps between rich and poor in income and other spatial arrangement are widened. Mike Davis (2006) puts the same

process in a broader context. He argues that economic globalization causes an unprecedented level of urbanization around world, largely through the opening of agricultural markets, and thereby destroying means of subsistence in rural areas of developing countries. As a result, the world is virtually turning into huge slums. This process is enhanced by what Harvey (2005) calls accumulation by dispossession, the transfer of assets owned by the poor, either individually or collectively, to the wealthy by legal or extra-legal means. In China, for example, many rural cooperatives have been transferred to individuals under implicit or explicit sanctions from local governments. At the same time, much of the arable land has been conscripted for further urbanization causing countless displacement of farmers. All these studies suggest that economic change causes spatial rearrangement, including international and domestic migration, of people along with capital and commodities in a much more accelerated speed.

What do these global trends specifically mean for individual cities and their dwellers who constitute urban communities? It largely depends on where a city is located in the world economy. Nevertheless, some studies suggest that, more or less, general rules apply. In the now classical book *Urban Fortunes*, John Logan and Harvey Molotch (1987) argue that urban settings have an intrinsic contradiction between use value and exchange value of real estate because land and buildings are simultaneously commodities as well as supporting basic conditions of living. According to them, almost all the urban “players,” ranging from political elites to labor unions to small business or real estate holders, have a stake in increasing exchange value through development. The problem is that they do not necessarily agree on a specific way of development. To the contrary actual residents prefer to defend the use values of place, such as rich social events,

security and identity of their neighborhoods. Community organizations in America typically try to defend use value because they tend to think urban growth usually causes instability which threatens this use value along with exchange value of their home (often representing their life-time investment). Mike Davis's study of Los Angeles (2006[1990]) partly deals with this "nasty politics of turf." According to his observations, middle class home owners' associations effectively blocked developers' and city government's public development plans which might degrade residents' living environments, as well as real estate values, under the slogan of growth control. In their study on American individualism, Robert Bellah, et al. (2008[1985]) document the blatantly racist nature of the "concerned citizens' movement" in a small town near Boston. The purpose of the community mobilization was to block the public project of building low-income housing for poor Hispanic and Black families which might threaten the security and identity of their town. Not all urban community mobilizations are necessarily reactionary in nature. Rather, it seems that the relationships of residential communities and other "players" in urban settings are more important. In his study on northern Manhattan area local politics, Ira Katznelson (1981) argues that even well-intended progressive movements can be mired in locally specific political dividing lines such as race and ethnicity. The point here is not arguing for or against the specific or intrinsic nature of certain actors in urban settings. Instead, the point is that any structural changes, such as neo-liberal globalization in an urban environment, are mediated through the relationships among these actors.

What kinds of impacts does the neo-liberal globalization have on urban settings? Since the global change has been framed in terms of flexible accumulation that is characterized by the rapid movement of capital and commodities, the logical

consequences are impacts on production processes and their related effects on urban settings: deindustrialization, flexible labor markets, and privatization of public space. In his book *Dialectical Urbanism*, Andy Merrifield (2002) traces interactions among various actors in an area of Baltimore, among other cities, unleashed by global economic dynamics. This traditionally working class neighborhood had been neglected due to the decline of the can manufacturing company in this area. And yet soon, financial speculation leveraged by hedge funds engulfed this area, as well as the company, with an injection of investment to the manufacturing company, that local politics could not match. The city government, which was incapable of envisioning their own plan for this area, accommodated the outside speculators. Local residents resisted the plan to build a luxurious condominium complex after closing down the manufacturing facility, based on the identity they had been invested in for more than past half century. This study shows how incapable the local politics can be in the face of super-mobile speculative capital. In another front, Louis Uchitelle (2006) tells us stories of the social consequences of flexible labor markets, and more specifically corporations' overused practice of layoffs. According to him, losing jobs by layoffs does not stop at the loss of income. It causes psychological injury affecting the very persons' identity and self-esteem. It is a shocking observation perhaps because he looks largely at skilled workers and managerial employees. Barbara Ehrenreich's (2001) and David Shipler's (2004) examination of the working poor show that psychological injuries in work places and public institutions such as social security offices are rather routine. The other front is the privatization of public spaces. The recent advent of the "LA School" in urban studies, in contrast to Chicago School in the early twentieth century, signifies the increasing scholarly emphasis on the

widespread phenomena of privatization of public spaces (Dear 2005). This “school” of urban sociologists holds, among other tenets, that contemporary urban developments do not stop at gentrification, which usually results in or even aims at displacement of urban poor. Through the processes called “Disneyfication,” whole cities are transformed into ahistorical theme park-like commercial spaces. Kim Moody (2007) traces the historical transformation of New York City from a welfare state to a regime which is busy promoting real estate value. Greg Umbach and Dan Wishmoff (2008) show the relationship, in New York City’s Chinatown, between commercial interests of Chinese-American elites and what they call “self-orientalism,” a strategy which initiated theme park-like redevelopment plans for tourists while paying little attention to Chinese-American working people who actually lived there. Although it has not been successful in New York City partly due to city government’s lack of enthusiasm towards the plan, similar urban transformations are occurring throughout the US.

The existing studies briefly discussed above, in my view, have two big holes in their theorization. First, the studies fall short of theorizing spatial rearrangement, including migration, of people that neo-liberal globalization inevitably entails. In other words, these studies inappropriately assume that only people who have already been there for a long time can constitute urban communities. If we are to take migration of people into account, we need to inquire more into the cultural phenomena of hybrid identity. Kian Tajbakhsh’s study (2001) takes this issue seriously by accepting Post-Marxist anti-essentialism. In his theorization, identity is fluid, overdetermined and constantly changing, especially in urban environments. Thus, logically, the best leftist strategy of mobilizing working people is to accept the differences among various kinds of working

people and to form an alliance under the common desire for radical democracy. In other words, the strategy is to flexibly approach the fluidity and ambiguity of identity in urban communities as urban settings are reconfigured in a volatile manner. Although I think his theorization is a good corrective to the existing urban studies assumption that urban communities already exist in somewhat complete forms, his argument that the “cardinal sin” of essentialism is solely responsible for the decline of Marxism is questionable. At the same time, there is no guarantee that Post-Marxist hegemonic strategies are always working, even if done properly. For example, the Post-Marxism still lacks concrete solutions to problems such as how to persuade or start meaningful political dialogues with working people who have been already mobilized under essentialist political rhetoric as Thomas Frank (2004) documents in his study of Kansas. This problem arise because his theory uncritically accepts the second problematic presumption of the urban studies as we discuss below.

Overall, the existing urban studies inadequately assume that economic change takes place temporally prior to other social and political processes and according to its own logic (with some exceptions such as the global level studies of Harvey 2005 and Sassen 2001). This is somewhat understandable in urban studies, given the experiential difference between the uncontrollably volatile scales of the global economy and the locally situated political and social processes we actually study. However, our study will be more fruitful if we think that economic change is also a historically situated social process. That is, unlike the dichotomous perception of system and life world in Tajbakhsh’s theorization, we need to think that the system should be viewed as a constellation of actors capable of constantly learning to make their way. Although there

are many problems with actions and theories of the left, the historical decline of the left can also be approached in the light of conservatives' reactions to the left's earlier successes, and in terms of how corporations and repressive state apparatuses have learned how to get around or even destroy radical politics. As Rick Fantasia (1988) argues, labor history cannot be understood without consideration of history of management. Similarly, economic restructuring is more fruitfully inquired into when we take into account what has been achieved by contentious politics of working people. This historical learning takes time because it involves, for example, the arduous processes of reconstructing historical memories of usable pasts, comfortable pasts and more inconvenient pasts (Blake 1999). For example, Javier Auyero (2000) shows how the Peronist legacies are utilized in a poor area of Buenos Aires. According to him, the legacy of the past Peronist political movement has been modified to accommodate the political clientelism which is essential to the survival tactics of the poor people in the area. As the recent "narrative turn" in psychology (Polkinghorne 2005: 13-15; Straub 2005: 64-65) suggests, narratives (especially, historical ones) play a crucial role in identity formation. Perhaps, as Lynn Hunt (1984) shows in her study on politics of symbol representations of the revolutions in France around the turn of 19th Century, the construction of socially hegemonic narratives takes a lot more time and resources than the psychological approach would be ready to admit. As Abelman (1996: 248) shows in the context of South Korean activism, "[t]he past echoes in the epics of dissent; and from these epics new epochs emerge."

I expect the significance of historical memories of past mobilizations to be similarly salient in South Korea when we consider that commemorating those who died during the past struggles is such a big part of South Korean activist rituals. For example,

names of South Korean labor movement pioneers such as Jeon Tae-II who protested government labor policies by setting himself on fire in 1970 are usually remembered at the beginning of rallies. In this regard of historical learning, I expect the interesting variations of South Korean progressive politics, in the light of the patterns of countries that industrialized earlier, to be approached more fruitfully if we consider the fact that South Korean radical movements used quite a long span of time to establish themselves as movements in response to a repressive and rapidly industrializing regime. And, in turn, big corporations and conservatives similarly needed time to learn how to undermine the radicalism of the left. In this regard, politics is always characterized by complex interactions and transactions among various actors. This study examines if historical memories matter for South Korean community activists who are emerging as serious actors in local politics.

3. Methods

In this section, the points of observation in this study are specified. As in many other case studies, the method of this study is eclectic. Mainly, however, I rely on what I could observe during my participant observations (conducted between April 2010 and January 2011) of three urban community activists and their organizations, with the help of the activists as key informants. The activists and their organizations are based in 3 different administrative districts⁸ of Seoul. Besides numerous informal conversations in the midst

⁸ The city of Seoul is divided into 25 administrative districts which contain about four hundred thousand people on average. A district can hardly be considered as a cohesive socio-economic and political community with a distinct identity. About the half of the households in Seoul which do not own a house tend to move frequently in and out of district boundaries and about 60 percent of work forces in Seoul commute over more than 30 minute distance (Sohn, Nak-Gu 2010: 29, 32). However, district boundaries are not entirely arbitrary in the sense that civic services and

of the fieldwork, two interviews (June 2010 and January 2011) were conducted with each activist. To situate this set of data collected through the fieldwork and interviews in socio-historical contexts, additional primary and secondary data were gathered from various sources, including governmental on-line publications, news media, and scholarly works.

(1) Participant Observation

The main purpose of participant observation in this study was to gather data on what community activists do and how they do it. More specifically, what kinds of activities are organized in and around community activist circles? What are the relationships among activists, as well as with people they contacted during their activism, like? Through what channels are human, organizational, and material resources mobilized to sustain these activities? Local elections, held in June 2010, provided an especially valuable window through which we can observe how community activists engage in local politics, with more than routinized activist repertoires.

Case Selection

The cases selected for this study were chosen to represent South Korean urban community activism in Seoul and were approached through my social ties in South Korea. I was close to student activists during my undergraduate as well as graduate student years in South Korea in the 1990s, even though I myself was not an activist. Many of my college acquaintances later became leftist social activists. One individual especially, who

political institutions such as elections and political parties are organized in accordance with the boundaries. For example, the bottom tier of four tier bus line networks is organized largely within a district government's jurisdiction. Certainly, it should be noted that there are some variations among the districts. Some districts are historically older, spatially or demographically larger, and/or economically wealthier than others.

has been involved in leftist activism and progressive political parties for more than a decade, helped me significantly by supplying contact information to the people I wanted to meet with during my preliminary research in the summer of 2009. Because of my reliance on activists, I ended up having access to some of the most successful cases of South Korean community activism. I selected three activists who were my primary access points to their organizations. I conducted preliminary interviews with these activists during the case selection process.

A Brief Description of the Cases

What follows here is a brief layout of background information about the selected cases in no particular order. More detailed biographical descriptions of the individual activists are the focus of Chapter III.

In-Ho⁹ was a community activist in his late thirties working largely in the Port district¹⁰ at the time of my fieldwork. He was in charge of the New Progressive Party (NPP) Port district members council (*dangwon hyeob-uihoe* or *dang-hyeop* in short) and played an instrumental role in founding the Port District Basecamp for Progressive Local

⁹ Throughout this study, I use pseudonyms for the activists, their organizations, and the administrative districts of their activism to safeguard against any unexpected unpleasant consequences of the publication of this study. Also, any reference which may be directly connected to them may be intentionally suppressed. In the following chapters, some events may be mentioned in the contexts of the other activists' actions than one who actually did to maintain the confidentiality.

¹⁰ The Port district has a historical legacy of commerce thanks to an accessibility to water transportation via Han River. In the modern era, a few prestigious universities were established within and near the district probably due to a close distance to the old city center. Especially, the existence of a highly esteemed art college made the district culturally rich one, inviting a number of theatrical, musical, and artistic production facilities and book publishers. It does not seem to be an accident that In-Ho's Basecamp initially began by progressive-minded young artists and students as an artistic project to facilitate public cultural enjoyments in the mid-2000s.

Politics (in short, Basecamp) in the late 2000s. In fact, the Basecamp was an important vehicle to realize his strategic vision of community politics. As the name implies, the Basecamp was designed to provide a physical place for organizing progressive political activities rather than a self-contained movement organization, although it was formally managed by a governing body which included one paid chief of staff as well as a few non-paid elected staff members. In-Ho was an acting head of the governing body along with a titular head. His vision of community activism seemed to be establishing an alternative local community based on reciprocally beneficial relationships and solidarity as opposed to an atomized consumerist society, and he shared this vision with other members. For example, the chief of staff summarized the underlying ideas as follows:

The life of the mass has already been restructured into an optimum form for capitalistic consumer society; as the consciousness of the mass is oriented toward capitalism through education, culture and mass media, the crisis in the political subject formation as democratic citizens has been prolonged. The essence of democratic citizen formation is “self-governance of the mass.” The lack of democracy would be inevitable if all the responsibilities and power are routinely delegated to the Capital/state or “progressive reformist force” merely through voting (or even non-voting). A construction of a new progressive party would not make any difference if the mass lacks the capability of self-governance over everyday affairs. Before it is too late, the capability of political self-determination of the mass need to be restored and the social solidarity based on a mutually beneficial and ecological way of life, beyond capitalistic growth and consumption addiction, must be expanded. (A discussion handout in January 2012, my translation)

Inspired by Italian nation-wide networks of working class neighborhood community centers, the Basecamp was attempting to construct horizontal networks of local individual as well as organizational (e.g. local labor unions) members. In 2010, more than 50 local organizations used its facility. The Basecamp provided after-school programs for local low-income household children and teenagers, practical and academic adult education

programs, as well as cultural programs for local adults. Members prepared communal “supper tables” more than 30 times. Members formed private clubs of common cultural tastes. And on approximately 40 occasions, the Basecamp participated in inter-organizational events. In addition, a number of activist organizations outside of the Port district visited the Basecamp to learn what was happening.¹¹ Basecamp welcomed such visits and attention from new media because the ultimate aim of the Basecamp is to construct a nation-wide network of community centers, something similar to European cases.

Moon-Su was the chief staff of the Mountain District¹² Solidarity for Grassroots Politics (in short, the Solidarity). In the 1990s, most of the shantytowns in the district were redeveloped into large apartment complexes, largely for middle classes. In this process, social activists organized mostly urban poor tenants to demand better compensations and re-settlement plans for poor people who could not afford to live in the newly built apartments. The Solidarity was established in the aftermath of the tenant protests in order to preserve the rich traditions of community activism in this area. The Preamble in the Articles of the Solidarity well summarizes the purposes of the organization as below.

[The Solidarity] began as a grassroots movement which aimed to solve, together with local residents, various everyday concerns such as dwelling, employment, education in poor areas. The traditions of urban poor area movements have been

¹¹ The 2011 Annual Membership Meeting handout (held in January 2011).

¹² Mountain district is hilly area remote from the old city center and began to be heavily populated during the industrialization when a number of shantytowns were established on hilly areas to house immigrants from rural regions. The immigrants became urban poor who typically worked for factories, construction companies and various urban informal sectors. The shantytowns became sites of urban community activism as early as the 1970s.

rooted in shantytowns, the symbol of alienation and poverty. Although shadowed by the facade of economic growth pushed under the alleged principle of “growth first, redistribution later,” shantytowns have ensured the dwellings and survival of poor people for the last thirty years. Especially, in the face of the full-fledged redevelopment processes in the 90s when local self-governance was fully reinstated, we sought to effectively react to dwelling needs of poor area residents and searched for grassroots political capabilities at the district level in order to build a local community which embraces poor people. The Solidarity was established by expanding *dong*[neighborhood]-level poor area movements into a district-level one.

Poverty problems of social minorities such as female household heads, low-income unemployed, disabled, children/juveniles are prolonged even after the dissolution of the shantytowns. Active participations of local residents as grassroots actors for sustainable models of local resident movements within the self-governing district and a livable district building with progressive cultural values for an open society shall be realized. [The Solidarity] shall open up the new 21st Century by continuing the traditions of the local movements. (My translation)

For more than a decade, the Solidarity have been trying (1) to organize local residents (especially, permanent renting unit¹³ tenants) and consolidate amicable relationships among members through various cultural activities such as movie screenings and traveling, (2) to provide after-school programs for low income children and juveniles and run a “village” library, (3) to organize local low income women into volunteers for community activism, (4) to advocate for responsible budgetary and other actions of the district government, (5) to raise environmental awareness among local residents by running environment-friendly shops, and (6) to work together with other activist organizations in the district.¹⁴ During my field work, many members (especially, leaders) felt that their progress had been halted and their activities were too routinized. As

¹³ In urban rehabilitation processes of a residential area, a certain portion of newly built dwelling units are required to be set aside as “permanent renting units” (*yeong-gu imdae jutaek*) largely for the re-settlement of previous poor tenants of the area. More discussions on this issue can be found in Chapter II.

¹⁴ The 2011 Annual Membership Meeting pamphlet (held in January 2011).

responses, the Solidarity actively participated in the 2010 local elections by forming a coalition with other progressives in the district and arranged a series of strategy meetings which were open to all members.

Bo-Ram was a first-term district council (*gu-uihoe*)¹⁵ member of the Forest district¹⁶ and was bidding for a second term when my fieldwork started. She also belonged to the district party members' council of the NPP and was the only non-major party¹⁷ member in the district council at that time. Bo-Ram represented an ideologically more moderate and pragmatic faction within the NPP. The faction (often dubbed as the “welfare faction” [*bokjipa*]) advocated a more immediate and tangible expansion of governmental welfare expenditures and viewed the DP as a working partner for the end. Within the district party members council, a more radical faction (often called the “independence faction” [*dokjapa*]) was present. The faction viewed the United Democratic Party (*Minjutonghapdang*; DP) as a (petty) bourgeois party and called for building a working class-based party which is independent from the DP and even the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). Before my fieldwork began, a factional fight broke out during and after a district party members council chairperson election. Because of the

¹⁵ District council is the legislative branch of district government. Council members (*gu-uiwon*) as a collective have power to make ordinances, which are effective within the jurisdiction of district government, and to oversee and approve budgetary and other practices of the executive branch that is colloquially called “district office” (*gucheong*).

¹⁶ The Forest district is relatively small in terms of population and located relatively far from the old city center. Historically, it contained a number of shantytown settlements and picnic trip attractions due to the accessibility to a national park area. At the time of the fieldwork, the most recent wave of urban redevelopment projects was turning the district into gentrified urban space with broadened boulevards and newly built high-rise apartment complexes.

¹⁷ As discussed in the later chapters, formal politics in Seoul has been dominated by two large parties, the Grand National Party (*Hannaradang*; GNP, which had been renamed as Saenuri Party at the time of writing) and the United Democratic Party (*Minjutonghapdang*; DP, with numerous temporal variations).

factional tension, the two groups were working separately most of the time during my fieldworks, and what I was able to observe was largely limited to what she did as a district council member in and around the public political institution of the district council.

Although these three cases had locally specific backgrounds, the differences seem to be complementary in the sense that they provided slightly different angles from which progressive community activism and local politics can be approached. Whereas In-Ho's Basecamp showed community activism in tandem with party politics, Moon-Su's Solidarity showed a non-partisan approach to community activism. In addition, Bo-Ram's activities helped me to see what was happening inside the district council and district office beyond the formality of the public institutions.

Fieldwork

During fieldwork, I tried to visit each activist once a week although the visits became more infrequent towards the end in February 2011. At the end of one visit, each activist and I discussed when the next visit might be. Each discussion can be characterized as a negotiation process between what they would like to show and what I would like to see. The "negotiation" usually did not take long, however, because of a near informational monopoly on the activist sides. It was actually closer to invitations from the activists to their fields. Although, due to this invitational nature or informational asymmetry, the activists can be viewed as gatekeepers, they were my friendly guides to the unfamiliar territory¹⁸ of community activism.

¹⁸ Some of the earlier field note entries remind me of my struggles to make sense of what I

(2) Interviews

As a supplementary data source, I conducted two interviews with each activist; one after the elections and the other at the end of the fieldwork. The first interviews consisted of two parts. In the first part, questions concerning each activist's life story which were deemed to be relevant for their activism, were asked. In the second part, questions about election processes and their evaluations of the results were raised. The concluding interviews were largely occasions when each activist and I could exchange opinions based on my fieldwork experiences.¹⁹ During the interviews, follow-up questions were liberally used for clarification and/or more details.

(3) Post-Fieldwork Research

To put what was learned during the fieldwork in broader historical and social contexts, some primary as well as secondary data sources were gathered after the fieldwork. Although some sources such as the autobiographies of two women discussed in Chapter II, were encountered rather accidentally, most of data sources were deliberately sought after through government websites, news media, and library catalogues. The South Korean National Election Commission publishes election results and the National Statistical Office provides demographic and other statistics through their webpages. News media are useful precisely because of their own implicit biases at least for this study. Among news sites, the *Hankyoreh* seems to largely reflect opinions of political liberals.

thought I had observed. In fact, in the beginning, I was quite bewildered by the unfamiliar circumstances I was in, although most "strangers" I had met for the first time tried hard to make me feel at home.

¹⁹ APPENDIX A and B are the English version of the first and second interview respectively.

Small internet media such as *PRESSian* are better sources of progressive discourses which are largely ignored by mainstream media. In addition, much scholarly attention has been paid to the dramatic historical evolution of South Korea. In this study, most of the scholarly works serve as secondary sources while some are treated as primary sources depending on the context of the discussion.

4. Chapters

In this section, brief descriptions of following chapters are offered to give some general senses of what is coming. Chapter II discusses the multiple-layered nature of the industrial and neo-liberal transformations in South Korea. Against the prevailing sociological image that essential processes cause general societal transformations, it is argued that we need to pay more attention to the differentiating and multiplying effects of such transformations in our understanding of South Korea. In addition, various people's struggles engendered by the differentiations are fertile ground for politics which can result in varying outcomes relevant for future development.

In Chapter III, life stories of our activists are offered and discussed. Although our activists can be politically classified as progressives as opposed to liberals or conservatives, such a cross-sectional grouping is not enough to understand why and how they were engaging in community activism. I delve into how they grew up, with what kinds of experiences and under what societal circumstances, and how they became interested in social activism. From this, this study suggests that these activists have gone through their own life cycles under historically specific circumstances. And their past

experiences provided them with their will and capability of resist what the dominant political order of the neo-liberal era attempts to impose on them.

Chapter IV describes our activists' engagement in local politics through elections, and discusses some implications of liberal democracy. Against the prevailing scholarly image of reasoned discursive competitions, it is argued that elections are a kind of social ritual where everyday social ties loom large and various political forces engage in complex and delicate interactions. By implication, rather than snapshot expressions of structurally determined positions such as economic classes, elections show a face of politics which continuously attempts to arrange and re-arrange variously connected people.

Based on the discussions in the previous chapters, Chapter V puts community activism in a larger historical context. This chapter attempts to show that the state was significantly implicated in politically mobilizing people toward the goal of modern developments. And the processes were highly selective. Although various levels of the state function as "neo-liberal growth machine" which seems to be quick to accommodate the paces of monetary circulation, it should be noted that the machine is sustained not only by the logic of neo-liberalism but also by the South Korean political alignment which has been formed through the state-sponsored selective mobilization processes. Our community activists, nearly without the experience of having such a resourceful national sponsor, engage in local politics to organize people with various social connections to pull necessary resources together through the connections, ultimately in order to slow down the workings of the "growth machines" to the degrees that comfort the rhythms of the lives of local residents.

These chapters are largely too unruly fragments of my observations around the community activism to draw a single definite conclusion. Therefore, the concluding chapter, instead of forcing each chapter to fit one argument, attempts to put forward, for future discussions, a plausible conclusion based on our previous discussions because the unruliness rather nicely reflects my observations of South Korean experiences. After all, it is the crisscrossing of different historical rhythms that seems to engender wild dynamics which make South Korea interesting. The community activists are one kind of the actors who make complicated seemingly orderly processes of neo-liberal globalization, by posing challenges to “growth machines” sustained in tandem with historically formed two-party domination in local politics. Lastly, some of the limitations of this study and a couple of ideas of possible future research are suggested.

CHAPTER II

MULTIPLE-LAYERED MODERNITY: THE UNDERLYING PERSPECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this chapter is to lay out the basic perspective on South Korean industrial and neo-liberal transformations that guides this study. In many sociologically informed perspectives, it is often assumed that there are some essential logics governing the historical evolution of a society in general through a uniform flow of time. My objection in this chapter is that much of the complexity in social processes can be lost if we do not pay sufficient attention to the ways in which the supposedly essential processes are intermingled with other social processes with different temporal rhythms and, thus, can be signified variously.

Under this theoretical premise, in the first section, we briefly examine sociologically informed scholarly works and discuss their historicity in terms of the genetic roots. Then, by examining stories about educational improvements and urbanization in the autobiographies of two women, we look at how seemingly uniform processes of industrial transformations differentiated people and engendered social contestations among people with different points of meaning-making than scholarly narratives. In the second section, we discuss similar multiple-layeredness of neo-liberal transformations with examples of financialization and urban renewal processes.

1. Modern Transformations, Differentiations, and the Contestations among the Differentiated

(1) The Myth of Grand Blueprints: Historical Specificity of Social Thought

On one November day in 2010, some community activists and supporting members of the Solidarity gathered for one of a series of workshops to envision their future strategies. The day's workshop aimed to reflect on topics such as what general societal as well as local changes had occurred during the last decade or so, and what the Solidarity did in response to such changes, in order to draw some useful ideas about what future organizational adjustments to the changes would be. The participants were divided into three groups of five or six. Although they were encouraged to share with others their concrete experiences epitomizing the perceived changes, their stories were hardly free of big and abstract words such as informational technology, de-politicization, civic consciousness, structural adjustment, class movement, democratization, neo-liberalism, community culture and so on. There was, it seemed, no doubt in their minds that South Korean society had changed fast, almost too fast for them to keep up with the pace of the changes.

“The world is changing faster than we are. [When it comes to economic development,] South Korea has become one of the advanced countries, changing from primary industry to secondary to tertiary. We pursued liberalization and democratization movement. The world is changing more rapidly than we imagined it would be,” one participant in the group I attended broached the discussion. His point was that working people have been left behind even though they “pursued right and honest stuffs.” Another participant, one of three persons who shared the headship of the organization, took her

turn and shed a more positive light. She was engaged in social movements in the 1980s and the early 1990s before she stayed away from social activism to earn a living for 10 years or so. When she returned to activism in 2005, she was amazed by the political changes. “Before 1993, people were arrested for their [political] statements. In 2005, however, I found people doing picketing on the streets. It really amazed me.” Later, she found during her community activism that she could even exert some influences on (otherwise inaccessible) civil servants of the district government by way of (friendly) district council members. A “work-fare” program manager raised issues of poverty. After conspicuous forms of poverty like shantytowns were cleared away from the urban scene, poverty donned rather different outlooks. The city-sponsored “work-fare” program he worked for had been helping various kinds of people, such as college degree holders in their fifties, young mothers, young people in their twenties and so on, impoverished due to various reasons of divorce, unstable entry level jobs and other temporary jobs. He had tried to build workers’ cooperatives as a form of economic community building but those cooperatives failed quickly due to a lack of competitiveness or rapidly changing market conditions. Under those conditions, according to the manager, the “work-fare” program could provide nothing more than temporary shelters for poor people. Then, a former staff of the Solidarity, who turned into a community librarian, took a turn. “When I worked here, I tended to meet people friendly to the Solidarity. After I started to work for the library, my feeling for serving ordinary residents is rather complex.” She was disappointed by people who took the public resources (books) to their private advantage shamelessly. An example was a parent who checked out all the books in her kid’s school reading list, and failed to return the books in time and refused to pay late fees. In her

mind, those phenomena were engendered by wrong-headed emphasis on competition promoted by the neo-liberal economic order. “We lost respect and care for others,” she lamented.

Most of their assessments were focusing on how and why society increasingly became less equitable or what caused the perceived systemic disorders in South Korea during the last decade or so. The other small groups added roll-backs of democratic achievements under the Grand National Party’s rule since 2008 and new media like internet as new forms and conditions for popular mobilization. These reflections are quite resonant with academic and popular pundits’ diagnoses of the contemporary historical conjuncture — probably because the latter are pervasive, if not dominant, discourses which try to characterize South Korean realities, and the participants were well accustomed to the use of these discourses.

Indeed, there are no shortage of publications that purport to reveal the logic behind social problems in South Korea. In the past decade or so, such discourses have been formulated around words like globalization and neo-liberalism, and the attractiveness of such words has been amplified especially after the 2008 financial crisis. To get some sense of what has been said in South Korea, let us look briefly at some of the works trying to diagnose South Korean society. *The Eight Hundred Eighty Thousand Won Generation* (88 *Manwoen Saedae* in the Korean title, meaning an estimated monthly income of average youth temporal workers, roughly eight hundred dollars, Woo and Park 2007) is one of the most widely circulated books to the degree that it became a political catchphrase in the years following its initial publication. According to the authors, current economic hardships experienced by South Korean youths are not an isolated phenomenon.

Rather, they are direct results of the worldwide domination of neo-liberalism which has constituted a “the winner takes all” economy. This nature of neo-liberal economic transformation has made economic opportunities enjoyed by the generation of the 1970s and the 1980s no longer available to these youth. As a result, ruthless intra-generational competitions over scarce opportunities have ensued, ultimately causing inter-generational disparities. The authors exhort the youth to resist current economic regimes just as the earlier generations protested against authoritarian states. Similarly, Uhm Ki-Ho, in his book *Nobody Shall Take Care of Others (Amudo Nameul Dolboji Mara, 2009)*, defines South Korean society as one which requires its members to be extraordinary just in order not to be eliminated. According to him, this fear over elimination, violent repression of social minorities, and militarism of “security states” are just different manifestations of neo-liberalism. According to the author, neo-liberalism is powerful not because it makes people greedy. Rather, under neo-liberalism, individuals constantly fear for their survival. However, in his view, this system is failing because neo-liberalism can be legitimized only by further intensifying, instead of relieving, the crises and risks of human society. To replace neo-liberalism, the author calls for forging alternatives out of collective reflections and the spirit of solidarity. Seo Dong-Jin’s book *Will to Freedom, Will to Self-enlightenment (Jayueui Euiji Jagigebaleui Euiji, 2009)* goes deeper and suggests a more pessimistic picture. He argues that the neo-liberal economic order is far from coercive. Rather, the keyword is freedom and what matters is the way freedom is defined and circulated among the public. Based on a Foucauldian concept of “governmental rationality,” he sees, in neo-liberalism, some sinister regulating norms which effectively mobilize free and self-motivated subjects. In other words, individuals under neo-

liberalism are “really” free, and yet only under the condition that the freedom is realized through ceaseless efforts to develop themselves into something useful for their employers. Therefore, workers become their own managers working 24/7 to be successful. Despite subtle differences in focus, these culturally oriented works commonly problematize the ways a post-industrial economy is organized by neo-liberalism and place it at the heart of social crises. And, we can easily find the resonance between what was said in the workshop and these works.

To what extent, then, are these diagnoses above able to adequately characterize South Korean realities? Before answering the question, we need to remind ourselves that these diagnoses are in themselves historical acts. They are historical because they are not only bequeathed repertoires from the past but also urgent interventions in current historical processes. The urgency makes those engaging in these discourses more like people measuring the direction and speed of a current while swimming amidst a whirlpool than a Sunday golfer throwing pieces of grass into the air before swinging a club. In other words, it is close to a matter of whether or not one drowns, rather than of how to pleasantly kill time.

First of all, the image of desperately attempting to measure the surroundings is very familiar. Recalling the tale of the foundation of sociology in introductory classes helps us to be aware that what we have seen above is indeed a part of historically inherited intellectual repertoires in crisis-ridden modern times. Jürgen Habermas is right when he views that the discourses on Modernity were out of contemporary intellectual attempts of self-understanding and self-assurance of the West (1987: 1-5). In Habermas’s view, Max Weber’s endeavor to describe modern rationality can be characterized in terms

of how it arose from western culture and then was abstracted from the initial context. Emile Durkheim's division of labor and Karl Marx's evolution in the mode of production are the very intellectual operation in which epochal changes are attempted to be grasped through the lens of one crucial change. Anthony Giddens' "reflective modernity," Habermas' "the colonization of life-world," and Michel Foucault's "bio-politics" are just a few more contemporary examples.

As much as western thinkers have identified the origins of modernity in Western cultures, South Korean intellectuals have viewed modernity as intrinsically foreign to the native culture. The consciousness of the foreignness, however, does not burden South Korean intellectuals' understanding of their country very much as far as modern changes are accepted as the universal fates of humanity. And, in a sense, the abstract essential words such as rationalization, division of labor, and modes of production make the cross-cultural acceptance easier. In the process, the cultural foreignness of modernity becomes universal while that which is native to Korea is grasped only in its cultural peculiarity when it gets in the way of the supposed universal development.²⁰ More fundamentally, however, the historical peculiarity of academic discourses is not only in the fact that theoretical priority is given to the universal, but also in the discourses presupposition that foreignness and nativness once existed as pure forms. In other words, the presupposition

²⁰ In a sense, earlier discussions on culture in the Western societies seem to have followed a similar logic in that culture used to be evoked only when it is concerned with racial and ethnic minority and/or poor people. Once-hotly debated issues around "cultures of poverty" are a prime example of it. As John and Jean Comaroff (1997: 24) argue, the concept of "cultures of poverty" has much to do with the historical processes of colonization in which "colonies became models of and for the 'improvement' of the underclass" within Western societies. In a similar vein, Edward Said (1983: 10-14, 16-17) argues, in the case of modern literature, modern secular developments were inseparable from cultural operations of distinction and discrimination.

blinds us from seeing that the foreignness and nativity can be assigned only after we see them already mixed.

The binary of modern/traditional shows a similar way of intellectual operation. Although it often appears to be easy to distinguish something new from old, the distinction is possible or even necessary only when they are juxtaposed or intermingled. The term “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous” (Koselleck 2004: 95) is useful in the sense that the concept helps us reexamine our one-dimensional naturalistic conception of time. When translated into social scientific terms, the concept tells us that factors with different degrees of duration and stability appear to constitute a set of temporal strata and social events can be understood as conjunctures of factors with different temporal strata at specific moments of history. The very concept, however, can mislead us to believe that each factor operating in a different historical plane exists as a pre-conjunctural pure form. Here, instead of getting deeper into philosophical discussions on history, let us use the concept as a heuristic conceptual device.

In sum, it can be said that sociologically informed scholarly works on South Korean social changes inherited the historicity of Western discourses on modern transformations in their emphases on narratives of apparently universally essential processes, implicitly based on binary conceptions of foreign/native and modern/traditional.

*(2) Autobiographical Writings of Two Women as an Example of “Epistemological Others”
to Social Scientific Discourses*

It is our discursive traditions that compel us to organize tales of epochal changes around one or a few essential changes. And, in this regard, tales of South Korean transformation are not an exception to the extent that it had never occurred to me that they could be told differently until I encountered a specific book. During my fieldwork, a community activist organization in the Mountain district published the autobiographies of two women who recently acquired literacy from one of the organization’s educational programs (Kim and Jo 2010). An activist of the Solidarity suggested me that I buy a copy. My encounter with the book was purely contingent on my fieldwork.²¹ What is more important than the accidental nature of the encounter for the current discussion is what we can learn from the book. The book consists of each woman’s own writing of her life story. The women, in their 60s and 50s at the time of publication respectively, do not appear to be related because they do not mention each other in their stories. Their writings are a compilation of a series of assignments (Kim and Jo 2010: 16-17), with some inconsistency across the texts whereby they fall short of making coherent narratives. The texts are in turn supplemented by interviews with unspecified interviewers who try to give us more detailed oral accounts of the same stories (Kim and Jo 2010: 18-19). Given the largely identical structure of both autobiographies (containing stories from youth,

²¹ Probably, I was not the only person who got the offer as one of the editors, in one of the several forewords, candidly says “I am curious who you are and under what circumstances you are reading this book. Perhaps, did someone force you to buy a copy?” (Kim and Jo 2010: 14) The way the copies were circulated seemed to testify how each individual group’s activities are supported through the networks of community activist organizations and the additional costs individual members of such organizations have to bear by the fact of being involved in community affairs. We explore more about this aspect of community activism in the next chapters (especially, Chapter V).

marriage, work, memorable acquaintances and the experiences of studying in their late ages), it can be said that the book is too influenced by the editors' pre-conceived schemes or guidelines, which determined what worthy topics were, in order to be "purely authentic" voices. In my view, however, concerns over whether the book represents pre-ideological authentic voices or not miss the point of publishing this kind of books.

In a broader sense, the autobiographies repeat the typical storyline of those who have lived through a tumultuous period of the industrialization in South Korea. They were born in rural regions around the Korean War (1950-53) and lacked a basic education because of their gender and position in sibling order. They moved to urban areas (Seoul in their specific cases) around the period of their marriages and settled in shantytowns. They had low-paying factory jobs and raised 2-3 children. Their illiteracy was a point of life-time shame and regret (*haan* in a typical Korean expression, see Abelmann 1996: 36 and endnote 23 of Chapter 2; Koo 2001: 136-139). Their memorable acquaintances are those who helped to take care of their children and even lent them money or those who did not pay back their hard-earned money after borrowing. A woman I met at the Basecamp in the Port district told me a similar life story. She was born in a semi-rural area and has lived in Seoul. She received some education during her youth, which made her superior to her peers at an educational program for senior citizens she attended. Her only son became an engineer with a doctoral degree. She despises her brother who has not returned her favor of taking care of his children who have been successful, she believes, due to her sacrifice.

These kinds of stories can be cited by scholars with various ideological orientations as supporting evidence of their views on South Korean industrialization,

although quite different pictures may be painted depending on the viewpoints of the scholars. Conservatives may be interested in showing the contrast between how miserable they were before and how affluent they are after industrialization through the capitalist route (perhaps as compared with the communist route of the North). Progressives may counter with the view that an unequal and exploitive economic system with severe political repressions came into being during industrialization. Despite the drastically different pictures they are painting, the main point worthy of controversies is how to evaluate modern industrialization. That is the “big question” we academics are still asking, and the stories people are telling tend to be “mere” data for us. At the same time, however, we academics already know that the point of telling such stories by “ordinary” people is a little different. This is one of the reasons why we need scientifically informed methodologies. And yet, because here we explore the ways how meanings are conferred to what they are doing, we need to deviate from the usual storylines and shift our attentions to what appears to matter to the actual authors.

Modernization Story #1: Improvement in Education and Its Shadowy Side

The title of the book, literally translated as *Smart Fools' Happy Writing*, seems to capture what the book tries to convey, although the title may not have been chosen by the authors. The reason that they called themselves fools is rather obvious: they lacked formal education and used to be illiterate as a result. That was a point of shame and remorse they have tried to hide all their lives.

You won't know how suffocating it is not knowing with the eyes open. Your mom has lived over 60 years like this. Now, I read signboards and write. I am studying only after reaching my 60s. ... On the street, I used to look up to those who were reading even when their clothes were humble. ... At first, I gave up studying

because of shame. Later, I thought how could it be more shameful than being illiterate. So I started to go to the Center [the community organization where they studied]. ... Being literate like this feels very good. Now, I can withdraw money at a bank on my own. It was really shameful to ask someone to fill the forms for me. (Kim. "A Letter to the Daughter," Kim and Jo 2010: 98, my translation)

It was always my homework and problem to live in my own dark room which nobody knew. I still shed tears when thinking about how suffocating and agonizing the feelings of raising and teaching four kids without knowing anything were. When kids were attending elementary schools and I had to fill form sheets the schools sent, my head was filled with dark clouds. I could not write even my name. Even though I knew my name, the thought that I write something on paper with a pencil made me unconfident, scared and afraid. My husband, because of being a heavy-machine operator, had to wander around other regions often. My only helper was the little eldest daughter. As though she knew mom's situation, my eldest daughter studied well and was nice. After the 2nd grade, she taught younger ones and filled the form sheets methodically with such tiny hands, which made me feel acute pains in the heart. ... Now, I can read fairy tales to my grandchildren. I want to teach Korean letters to people like me in the future. ... I will walk until I can and I will never drop books until I can hold pencils and my eyes allow me. My name is Cho Jeom-Suk. I am a happy woman. (Jo. "My Name Is Jo Jeom-Suk," Kim and Jo 2010: 199-201, my translation)

As an apparent sales pitch, the activist told me that he attended the graduation ceremony of the two women and saw they could not stop tears flowing down in their cheeks. The book is filled with passages like the above, and helps us understand what the meaning of their tears; the meaning is that they are proud enough to express deep-seated *haan* with their own writings. In other words, the passages above with such a degree of emotional turmoil testify to the fact that they survived even though survival was not too easy to come by. In other words, what is "smart" about the "fools" has something to do with the fact that they beat the odds.

What does their proudly made point of having survived tell us about the nature of modern industrialization, however? Scholars on South Korean economic development do not hesitate to point out that the East Asian disposition toward education was conducive to the rapid industrialization in South Korea, contributing to producing suitable work forces (Cumings 1997: 300-301; Koo 2001: 38-39). Even before the so-called economic

“take-off” in the 1960s, the South Korean government managed to invest in building some 17 thousand elementary school classrooms from 1954 to 1959, improving elementary school enrolment rates from 72.9 in 1953 to 96.4 percent in 1959 (Ministry of Culture and Education 1988: 152-153; Kang, Seong-Guk et al. 2005: 35). The alleged “Confucian” disposition was probably helped to be expressed by a combination of the Cold War and the accompanied Rostovian developmentalism²² through foreign aid and policy consultations. In fact, the rapid construction of schools might not have been possible without US-led foreign aid through agencies such as the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency and International Cooperation Administration of the US (Ministry of Culture and Education 1988: 153; Kyoyuksinmunsa 1999: 299, 318-319). It can be said that the traditional value of education could come alive in conjuncture with an American modernization project. Whatever the fundamental cause might be, there is no denying that educational attainment from elementary to secondary to higher education among South Korean youths have steadily increased since then as the society’s overall capacity to provide educational resources has increased (Kang, Seong-Guk et al. 2006: 105-106). The truthfulness of this assessment, however, can be maintained only when the improvement in education is viewed through the lens of how the rapid mobilization occurred; whether market-centered or state-centered views, scholars tend to view the historical development from a similar perspective; from a commanding center of policy

²² After some complex turns of events between 1945 and 1948, the US government somehow decided to have an anti-communist government in the southern side of the 38th parallel line on the Korean Peninsula (Cumings 1997: 185-202). Around 1957, the US government started to alter the nature of aid from military to economic, informed by W. W. Rostow’s developmentalism, as an attempt to modernize the newly independent impoverished country based on a policy of economic growth (Woo 1991: 69-71).

makers (Kim, Eun Mee 1997: 8-17). If so, what can we say about this change from the perspectives of those who have lived through it, but from the margins?

It is one thing to say that South Korea underwent rapid modern transformations; it is quite another to say that individual members of the society as a collective strived to reach the same goal. The conflation is often used to bolster conservatives' views on the economic development in South Korea, not so surprisingly in a nationalistic rhetoric often with militaristic language.²³ Underneath conservative views lies an assumption that individual actors are rational calculators: very similar to those the neo-classical economists would like us to believe them to be. With this thought in mind, let us return to these women whose book we have discussed above.

The educational improvements during the industrial transformations affected individuals hardly in a uniform fashion. Rather, the transformation differentiated individuals. As pointed out, for example, it was their gender or sibling order or both which prevented them from attaining an education. According to a survey by Park, et al. (2008) of these women's age cohort samples of 1,526 (those who were born from 1943 to 1955) through a systemic sampling, our women's perceptions on the causes of their lack of education seems common. Although the women's lack of education is not typical even among their generation, gender and sibling order mattered when decisions of how much education one would attain were concerned.

²³ For a discussion on the usages of militaristic language, see Moon, Seungsook (2005: 23-43).

Figure 2-1. Desired Level of Education Attainment around the Age of 14²⁴

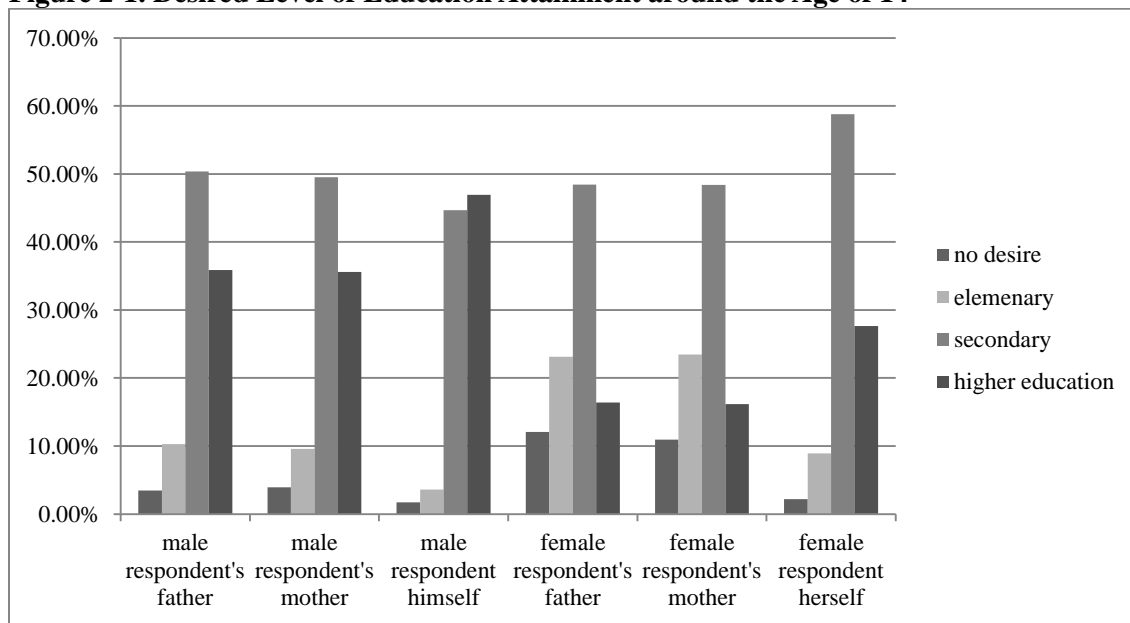
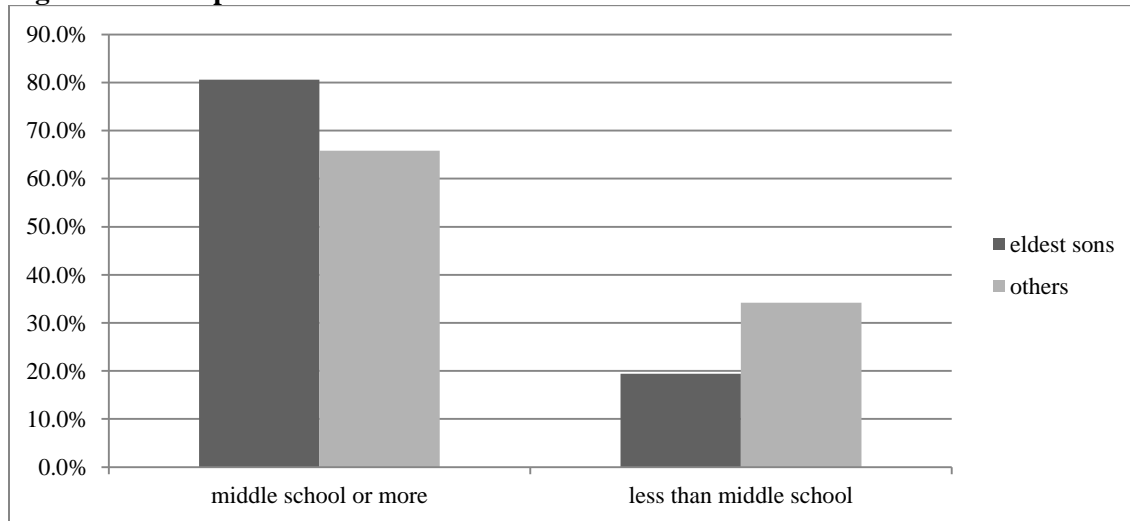


Figure 2-1 shows that, according to the respondents' recollections in 2008, there were noticeable gender disparities of desired educational attainment levels among those born between 1943 and 1955. Although secondary education is the mode value of parents' desired education level for both male and female respondents (each around 50 percent), parents are reported to have desired higher education next to secondary for their sons whereas they tend to be content with elementary education as the second most desired level for their daughters. When it comes to respondents' own desire, the gap between men and women is shown to be even larger. Whereas the majority (58.79 %) of female respondents report that they desired a secondary education, the most common response by their male counterparts is that they wished to receive a higher education (46.94 %). These disparities in desire seem to have real effects on actual education attainment. In their multinomial logit regression analyses, Park, et al. (2008: 101, 103, 106) show that

²⁴ The age of 14 seems to signify the age of entering middle school. The figure is drawn based on modified data from Park, et al. (2008: 52) Table III - 9.

women were consistently disadvantaged across all education levels. Sibling order is shown to have statistically significant effects on high school education attainment, too (104).

Figure 2-2. Comparison between Eldest Sons and Others in Actual Education Attainment²⁵



When gender and sibling order are combined, it seems that they had tangible effects on individuals' lives. Figure 2-2 shows that individuals had a better chance of getting an education of middle school or more if they were eldest sons. It was good to be an eldest son in South Korea at the time. How can this cultural phenomenon be explained? Was it a legacy of the alleged Confucian tradition? Perhaps, perhaps not. It seems to be a more plausible explanation that the phenomenon is an instance of South Korean familism. In his article on modern familism in South Korea, Dongno Kim (1990) argues that South Korean families developed ways of maximizing each individual family's interests because, in the course of the rapid modern industrialization, the state lacked resources and/or the will to protect its citizens as individuals. In this light, it can be said that each

²⁵ The figure is drawn based on Park, et al. (2008: 83-84) Table IV - 3. Two variables are shown to have a statistically significant relationship at less than .001 level of type 1 error.

family poured its limited resources into a few children to maximize the family's returns on educational investments, given that it was better to have one college graduate compared with several elementary school graduates. The explanation sounds great except that other activities of the arguably rational families seem to often show something contrary.

In their autobiographical book (Kim and Jo 2010: 33-35), one woman tells us of an episode of secret brewing. In preparation for her brother's marriage, her family illegally brewed like other people in the village. One day, state agents were dispatched to police the illegal activity and, upon hearing the news, her father fled to the communal house of the village and the entire family members vacated the house as other families would do to avoid the encounter with state agents. According to her, the strategy worked because people's desperate attempt to cover up was investigators' clue to where to look into. Her father did nothing but smoking cigarettes, which seems to be interpreted by her as a sign of distress, in the communal house until the agents went away without discovering anything about the brewing. In South Korea at the time, rural families were plagued by spring famines year after year (Kim, Eun Mee 1997: 1). Under this circumstance, there is little rationality in wasting precious grains for making alcohol beverage and starving in spring time. That is partly why the private brewing of individual families was prohibited and the state bothered to survey people's living quarters and kitchens although inquiry does not seem to be quite thorough. According to her recollection, her family was also one of those which suffered from chronic spring famines (Kim and Jo 2010: 24, 28). I do not mean, however, that they were simply dumb. They did what they did for reasons. In her family's case, they brewed because they were

planning a marriage. They even strategically reacted to the state agents with coordinated actions. The point I want to make here is simply that it is a little too stretched to assign the word rationality to this activity as the fundamental foundation of their actions. The modern rationality embodied by the state in this case represented little more than intrusive gazes of the state²⁶ and, to the people, a source of anxiety as shown by the father's reaction. As shown in our discussion of Poi-dong shantytown later in the next section, the rationality, which is often theoretically imagined to be embodied by state (Das and Poole 2004: 7), is more often than not accompanied by physical violence exercised by state, whether directly or through delegated agencies.

Of course, people do not have to be consistently rational all the time to be labeled as modern. Here, I am calling for neither a more stringent nor flexible criterion for modern rationality. What is more important in the context of our discussion is to reflect on what epistemological plane the discourses on modern rationality lie in, and in what ways the discourses actually illuminate lived experiences of people. The significance of the studies such as Dongno Kim's (1990) lies in the fact that we started to perceive modern transformation as a change from one context-specific rationality to another, rather than a process where traditional irrationality eventually gives way to modern rationality. And yet, it makes sense only when we assume that there must be a fundamental first (rational) principle of organizing a society. On this epistemological plane, people's lived experiences are meaningful only when the experiences are able to tell us about the transformation just as, in the current evangelical Christianity, what the historical Jesus reportedly did is significant only in the light of its salvation theology. We

²⁶ James Scott (1998: 6) characterizes this aspect as imperialism, the connotation of which renders the state as something intrinsically foreign.

may find a strange circularity, if not teleology, in the narratives of modernization such as “modern conditions made education important and individual people’s decisions to get more education helped modern society to come about.” The redundancy, in my view, stems from the fact that we tend to start our inquiry with already existing implicit narrative templates on modern transformations.

What if, unlike canonized figures such as the founding fathers of sociology, we do not assume the existence of any first principles and, instead, see social phenomena as something emergent out of historically contingent combinations of provisionally formulated repertoires of individual or group actions?

When I grew up, we did not get every meal. At that time, women could not even dream of getting education and were told to do household chores and to take care of kids. In our home, we have 9 sisters and brothers so that we could not even eat properly. But, one sister did not listen to our parents and stubbornly went to school. I could not have a chance to be educated precisely because of her. Now, we have gotten older and married one by one. After our independence from each other, [I realized] I was so naïve that I could not get educated. In the past when we lived in countryside, it never occurred to me that education was so important. But, after I moved to Seoul and got a job and social life, education was needed. (Kim. “Happy Writing,” Kim and Jo 2010: 84-85, my translation)

In my mind, the lived experiences depicted in the book appear to be closer to historically contingent and provisionally formulated repertoires of individual actions. One of our women states that her mother wanted her to stay at home and to help her with the household chores even though she was officially enrolled in a school (Kim and Jo 2010: 25-26). She “chose” to fulfill her mother’s wish without knowing that the decision would inflict so much pain in the future (85). To the contrary, her elder sister persisted even though her father did not see any necessity in educating women for what they would do in the future (Kim and Jo 2010: 26, 29, 84-85): Household chores and giving birth. When examining this more closely, we may even notice that the provisionally formulated

repertoires were related to some symbolic contestations between the sisters who made different “decisions.” According to her recollection, her sister “fled” to the school simply because she hated doing household chores (Kim and Jo 2010: 26), implying that the author was playing the “good” daughter role unlike her sister. Only in the hindsight, she regrets her “decision” and blames her sister for her own lack of education, although both of our women managed to get jobs, and becoming skilled workers without being able to read, according to their recollections (Kim and Jo 2010: 75-76; 225-7). As Jo reported:

As I got hired and worked, it was pretty uncomfortable to lead an occupational life without having education. I couldn't do things like [reading] centimeters. I didn't know [what] centimeter [was]. ... I used “scotch tape” to check the lengths. [Thanks to using tape, my works] were said to be very accurate. ... I had to be exact because I was in the middle with people before and after me [in the assembly line]. ... I couldn't have worked if I had said I didn't know. ... I couldn't let others know [I couldn't read] not least because of my pride. (Jo in the Interview, Kim and Jo 2010: 226, my translation)

One of the sources of her pain seems to be the fact that everyone else was educated and that she should hide her lack of education. In other words, paradoxically, their *haan* got deeper because of the modern transformations such as the spread of literacy and changes in the occupational structure of South Korea, which she never anticipated at the time of her “decision.” For these women, education (or lack of it) grew from seemingly trivial sibling contestations into life-long struggles for human dignity. As pointed out above, the women could not let the shame of illiteracy go, and engaged in another symbolic struggle by starting education at a late age. To point out only that the spread of literacy in South Korea helped its modern industrial transformations is to ignore this side of the story. That is to say, the academically generalized discourses on literacy is too loose to grasp the sorrow expressed in the particular stories we have discussed so far, precisely because there is a slight difference in the focus of telling the seemingly same story. And the

difference stems from the fact that the generalized story has meanings only in so far as its relationships with other transformations are clear in our intellectual pursuits, whereas these women's stories accentuate the fuzzy and provisional characteristics of individual actions in the course of historical development. In this light, the felt *haan* is viewed as a superfluous and unintended byproduct of the spread of literacy in the scholarly narratives, while in their stories, it is embedded at the very heart of the process.

Modernization Story #2: What Does Urbanization Signify?

We can go on and on about the conceptual slipperiness of other abstracted concepts of modern transformation in representing lived experiences of people as they would interpret. The slipperiness is engendered from the fact that generalized scholarly discourses deliberately erase the narrativity of concepts contained in particular stories and, in doing so, turn into nobody's actual stories (Somers 1997: 97). To repeat, concepts adequate enough for telling generalized discourses of modern transformation reveal their inadequacy with a subtle shift in focus. Urbanization is another instance of such concepts. In our academic discourses on modernization, urbanization is an indispensable component because the concentration of large workforces is considered to be functional to industrialization. In South Korea, scholars differ only in that conservatives tend to emphasize the "pull factors," mostly of job availability, whereas progressives are attracted to stories of the disintegration of rural communities. For conservatives, the rapid urbanization in South Korea saved those who otherwise would have starved in the rural areas. For liberals and progressives, the story is more complex. The urbanization in South Korea came only at the expense of the destruction of rural communities. The destruction

of rural communities has been historically manifested as regional parochialism of the urban areas because the rural-to-urban migrants brought the “cultural baggage” of communalism with them. The narrow-mindedness of communalism like familism is thought to hinder a “proper” development of civic consciousness among the populous. This curious mixture of romantic and critical attitudes towards traditionalism on the liberal and progressive sides, seems to reflect certain tensions not only between aesthetic appropriations and social scientific treatments of historical communalism (traditions) in *minjung* radicalism but also between the native and the foreign under the historical circumstances of the successive foreign interventions. Whether conservative or progressive, these accounts are true enough for the bird-eye academic discourses they tell, yet too blunt a tool with which to talk about the ways in which meanings are conferred by those who actually made the journey.

When one of our women settled after her marriage in Seoul, she recollects that she was stunned by the living conditions of the neighborhood. She found her room filled with rats “running around like playing a soccer game as if the room were their own world.”

And when I was living in countryside, I imagined that Seoul must be very stupendous. But, when I actually arrived, I just cried, asking myself “Is this it?” Upon seeing it, I thought that a pigs’ pen in countryside would be better than that. Upon the moving, I mistook a shabby structure outside as a toilet. After opening the door, I found people living there. The actual toilet was 5 minutes away, used publicly. People formed a line, waiting for their turns. People in hurry would knock the door shouting “come out quickly.” I thought Seoul would be fancy when I came. But, we did not have our own toilet and the house was not an actual house. I had never seen such a house before. When I visited my parents’ home, I felt that our pigs’ pen was better than mine. I told my mom that your house was much better than mine in Seoul. She replied that people said I had died because of a big rain storm. She told me that rumor had it that I had died living in a strange dwelling. Upon my visiting, people asked if I had been alive. (Kim. “Story of the honeymoon year room,” Kim and Jo 2010: 47-48, my translation)

Life there was unbearable because of shortage of water. So, the district office would send water trucks on an hourly basis. After going through physical struggles with other people, one could manage to get only a bucket of water. But, the amount was not enough. Someone dug a well and sold water. I used to buy two buckets and carried it on an A-frame only to see just one bucket amount of water remaining in the buckets. At that time, rice, charcoal, and water were most important. How can I forget those days when we suffered from the scarcity of even charcoal? (Jo. "Our Family to Nangok [the name of a shantytown]," Kim and Jo 2010: 171, my translation)

There are no specific accounts of why they decided to move to a shantytown in Seoul except that the husband wanted to in the case of Kim. What is important enough to tell are how horrible the initial living conditions were and that they somehow survived it. There is no serious effort made to profess how wonderful or dismal the industrial transformations were or what was wrong with them as our academic discourses would focus on. Eventually, they made the place their hometown, making social relationships with others. Some people offered helping hands when they were in need while others betrayed their trusts by not paying back their favors. Whether their ways of living were modern or traditional is clearly beside the point.

It is not my intention to conclude that, since the built-in imagination of grand master plans of modernity in our academic discourses somehow hinders us from seeing a truer picture of South Korean modern transformations, we need to do away with them. Concluding so would be both insufficient and even misleading. I think there are at least a couple of reasons why we should restrain ourselves from jumping onto a wholesale rejection of academic discourses. Firstly, we need to keep it in mind that, if we can make a distinction between what to say and how to say it, questioning the validity of the latter does not automatically invalidate the former. Because modern academic discourses have been some of the better tools available, they represent not only limits but also the very possibility for us to talk about modern transformation at all. Even though academic

discourses are deeply embedded in the myth of grand master plans as I would argue, what is conveyed through the myth or what the various authors try to do is not so different from what we are trying to do in our current discussion: Namely, measuring the direction and velocity of currents in the vortex in order not to be drowned. More fundamentally, the conclusion is problematic because it relies on the positivist presumption that there is a pre-discursive social reality as if waiting to be signified and a better tool may lead us to see a truer picture of it. Every lived experience is always-already signified, although a certain way of signification may be promoted or suppressed more than others in a certain discursive condition. It can be said that suppression occurs precisely because experiences are signified in certain inconvenient ways. In this light, the autobiographical book we have engaged in so far is a valuable source of our discussion not because it represents pre-ideological lived experiences. In fact, we cannot fail to notice that the book is peppered with ideologies of literacy and family from cover to cover. Rather, the significance of the book lies in the fact that it shows us possible different points of signification than what our conventional discourses purport to reveal. It is not that we need a strict distinction between popular and academic ways of meaning-making, however. What I have in mind is closer to an image that our hands leak some of water while holding enough of it for drinking. It does not seem to be wise to give up drinking because of the leakage. Despite subtle leakage, our academic discourses are still too useful tools to be rejected entirely.

2. Multiple-layeredness in Neo-liberal Globalization

In what follows, let us look into a few examples of how some of the meanings that have escaped our academic discourses create potential sources of myriad social conflicts in the globalizing South Korean city of Seoul. Globalization, an ensemble of macro-social, economic and political processes, is taking place inseparably in tandem with locally generated social meanings being contested among various groups of local people whose identities are changing along with these processes. No matter what language the realities generated by the processes of globalization are represented with, they are neither global nor local; neither modern nor traditional; neither foreign nor native in an ideal-typical sense of the words. This deeply hybrid nature of lived experiences gives rise to contestations as to the meanings of life in the concrete landscapes of the city.

(1) Financialization, Transnational Transfer of Wealth, and Its Local Clones

One of the salient features of globalization is what can be termed financialization, as capital flows across national borders is increasingly liberalized (Jang 2010). This global tendency has engendered local a reordering in various aspects of life. The proliferation of the secondary and tertiary financial industries outside of the more regulated primary banking industry and the instant availability of credit are the most visible. “You are qualified to borrow three million Won (some three thousand dollars) today” was a typical text message I received from lenders (actually, fee-seeking lending brokers) virtually every day.²⁷ Most of these unwanted messages lead to usurious lending schemes, or

²⁷ Recently, an unregistered lending broker was persecuted for sending large quantities of unsolicited text messages thanks to which he or his female-sounding pseudonym almost became a “pronoun” for lenders. (The Hankyoreh August 2, 2011 internet edition)

worse, simple frauds. Of course, usury is not particularly a modern practice, let alone a product of the recent neo-liberal globalization. When looking at the historical process in which South Korea became a “lenders’ heaven,” however, we can better understand the tangible relationship between the local practices of usurious lending and the neo-liberal globalization.

As Gi-Wook Shin (2006: 205) observes, the globalization initiative in South Korea started as Kim Young Sam Administration’s (1993-1997)²⁸ politically motivated nationalistic project. In the policy initiative, the financial deregulation was thought to give a boost to the national economy by inviting foreign investments. In 1997, South Korea paid a high price for the policy amid the increasing volatility of international currency transaction. One of the brilliant moments in South Korean democracy, occasioned by the election of Kim Dae Jung as President, a life-long pro-democracy opposition leader, coincided with an economic crisis and a subsequent intervention from the IMF, curiously similar to the aftermath of communist regime collapses in Eastern Europe as Naomi Klein (2007) documents (many South Koreans still call the years the IMF Period or more interestingly the IMF Economic Crisis). As a mandate attached to the rescue loans arranged by the IMF, South Korea was forced to maintain high interest rates as a matter of policy.²⁹ The mandate, in turn, was used as a pretext when the legal limits of all interest rates were entirely abolished just less than a month after the IMF

²⁸ The Kim administration was the first “civilian government” [*Munmin Jeongbu*] since the 1961 military coup as the government was fond of calling itself.

²⁹ Maintaining high interest rates is an essential element of the notorious Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) imposed by the IMF, as Ha-Joon Chang (2008: 152-154) among many others observes. According to Chang, the South Korean case in 1997 is a part of well-patterned “bad Samaritan” practices in the sense that international financial institutions dominated by a few countries of the North exploit countries in needs of help.

intervention (Song 2011: 46-48). Whose interests did the abolition serve even when the IMF did not actually call for such a move? Even though a series of regulatory measures establishing an interest rate ceiling were reintroduced later on, it was not until the proliferation of “aggressive and predatory lending” practices had already taken off. This impacted even local level money transaction practices which are often associated with semi-legal or even illegal means of luring borrowers and extracting payments after lending, including deception, and psychological and physical harassment, sometimes outsourced to local thugs barely disguised as private (security) services (Song 2011: 35-43). It was not until the last phase of Kim Dae Jung presidency (specifically, October 2002) that any interest rate ceiling regulation was re-installed. The National Assembly (NA, the national level law-making body) and the administration chose to keep that situation after the IMF mandate ended in April 1998.

The consequences were deeply felt by many South Koreans. The private loan market outside of the more regulated primary and secondary tiers of financial industries swelled to at least more than 4 times larger than at the start of the crisis (from some 4 billion in 1995 to 18 billion dollars in 2005, which is tantamount to roughly 2 percent of South Korean GDP) with interest rates 10 times higher on average, and “serving” at least 10 percent of the South Korean adult population. Even regular banks secretly directed their money to the market for easy profits (Song: 71-74). In the process, the general direction of wealth transferred by means of what is termed “accumulation by dispossession” accompanied by the neo-liberal globalization seems be clear (Harvey 2003: 137-182, 2005: 161-162).³⁰ That is to say, international “bad Samaritan” practices

³⁰ Wayne Ellwood (2001: 38-52) also suggests a similar account. Samir Amin (2004: 31-42) finds

seem to be multiplied into national and local ones. The question of demarcating who exploits whom through neo-liberal financialization is complex and multiple-layered if the global-national-local nexus is to be considered. Many other urban practices under neo-liberalism seem to have their own complexity, which only makes our understanding of neo-liberal globalization more complicated. One such complexity is concerned with time as the case of Poi-dong shantytown shows.

(2) Multiple Temporalities: Convenient Pasts, Inconvenient Pasts, and Social Conflicts

Probably, nowhere represents the concept of the “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous” better than the shantytown of Poi-dong, which recently underwent another example of “bad Samaritan” practices. One might be tempted to point to old palaces of Choseon Dynasty (1392-1910) and the adjacent “historic district” of Insa-dong in the old city center, instead. In my view, however, the old palaces rather match very well with the glamorous building forest in the section of the city still or ceaselessly under construction. Walking south from the buildings of governmental offices, crossing the newly built tall buildings of news media companies and financial institutions such as City Bank, is Cheonggye Creek³¹ which is heavily paved with expensive materials such as granite. Down the stream, the tall buildings give way to less fancy mom-and-pop shops whose efforts to stay relevant are expressed in newly installed signboards with the city-provided identical design. Strolling for a while, we encounter largely two kinds of people: groups of tourists who faithfully follow their guides hoisting small banners over their

it more deeply rooted in historical liberalism and capitalist accumulation.

³¹ The urban renewal project around the creek was one of President Lee Myeong Bak’s prize achievements during his mayoral years (2002-2006).

heads and, around lunch hours, throngs of smokers who work in nearby buildings. Completing the scene are colorfully donned guards marching in step with the vociferous music of a marching band behind them. Following them leads to one of the old palaces where the “Royal Guards Changing Ceremony” takes place, usually 3 times a day (what is the point of having guards in a place no one, let alone a royal family, actually live in?). Devoid of any historical weight, the old palaces do not pose any threat to the city’s operation of turning the old city center into a timeless tourist theme park.

On the other hand, the Poi-dong shantytown is something people around them want to get rid of as soon as possible. Sitting within a stone’s throw of a luxurious high-rise structure called Tower Palace, a symbol of South Korean nouveau riche, where even government officials have to beg a permission to enter into,³² the shantytown’s existence made affluent people around it uncomfortable enough to do a petition drive. Some of the people living in the settlement make a living by scavenging on neighboring rich people’s “waste.” The possibility of scavenging seems to make the settlement an ideal place for poor people but, actually, the poor people were forced to settle there by the government long before the place became famous as a rich people’s sanctuary. In 1979, the collapsing Park Jung Hee administration gathered vagabonds to form concentration camps called “Self-Help Working Corps” (*Jahwal Geunro Dae*). Some of them were forced to settle in Poi-dong by the subsequent Chun Doo Hwan administration (1981-1987) in 1981 precisely because few people lived around there. Without any basic infrastructure such as running water, sewage, and paved roads, the people had to build the settlement from

³² Recently, Tower Palace was a site of a fuss when private security guards blocked the entry of election commissioners and reporters during the 2011 popular referendum in Seoul. (The Hankyoreh August 24, 2011 internet edition)

scratch just like the beginnings of any other shantytowns. Until the Corps was officially disbanded in 1988, their lives were managed by government officials, often with the violent methods used in military barracks of the time. On top of it, some of them were periodically subject to police violence. Some of the dwellers testified that they used to be randomly arrested and waterboarded until they incriminated themselves. During the 1980s, the region around the settlement was developed and started to be filled with burgeoning middle class people. In 1990, the district office started to ask the shantytown dwellers to leave and to fine them for “illegally” occupying public land. The district office refused to recognize them as residents even though the National Human Rights Commission recommended to do so in 2008. The district office did not stop at refusing to recognize them. After a big fire in 2010 which consumed most of the buildings in the settlement, the district office, instead of offering help to the victims, sent thugs to preempt any rebuilding efforts. Apparently, the people’s disaster was an opportunity for others to clear the “problem” once and for all. Few else would be qualified as “bad Samaritan” practices if this does not count as one. And, this is done by a local government in the name of other residents.

The apparent reason why the rich people are bothered, to this degree, by the presence of less than one hundred 180 square foot dwellings is “degrading the scenery.” Behind the rationale, however, lie the interests of various actors explicitly and implicitly involved in the affair. From the surrounding residents’ point of view, the presence of the shantytown is thought to devalue their real estate. The claim, however, is based on psychological anxiety rather than on actual financial value since the prices of real estate

are rather mysteriously determined with little tangible connection to construction costs.³³

A nearby plot of land could be appreciated or depreciated with or without the presence of the shantytown. The perceived benefit gained by clearing the shantytown is very elusive in nature when compared with the concrete suffering of the people living in the shantytown.

Perhaps, it is rather the presence of poor people itself that the well-off do not like as a symbolic struggle over social status. The middle classes' distaste towards poor people can be observed in various social practices. When I helped Bo-Ram canvass her electoral district during the local elections, I could observe one such manifestation in terms of spatial arrangement.

Figure 2-3. The Spatial Arrangement of an Apartment Complex



After bitter conflicts between tenants and developers in redevelopment project areas during the 1990s, developers are, by law at the time of writing, required to set aside 17 percent of newly built units in a residential redevelopment project as renting units for

³³ One expert recently estimated that it would cost about sixty thousand dollars to build a one million dollar apartment unit in the area we are discussing. (The Hankyoreh May 14, 2011 internet edition)

previous tenants and low income households in the area. Two buildings marked by the rectangle in Figure 2-3 are such units. Not only are the buildings designated with different numberings (Building 201, Building 202 while all other buildings are numbered with 100 level numbers), their marginal location in the spatial arrangement of the complex seems to insist that these buildings are indeed an addendum. In the actual scene, these buildings are placed in a dimpled site clearly lower than other buildings with fences which effectively compartmentalize them from other buildings in the complex. Therefore, people living in these units are recognized by local people as the poor just showing their addresses and have to use their own route to the nearby streets, barely sharing one of the apartment complex entrances.

Such discriminatory practices do not stop there. In 2011, one elementary school in another district was on the verge of closing down because middle class parents transferred their children to a nearby school citing a conspicuous presence of children from such renting unit apartments in the school. The school was stigmatized as one attended by the “renting children” (*imdae eorini*). And the children were often called “beggars” by their peers.³⁴

Sometimes, the concerns over the possibility of attracting poor people in their neighborhoods compel rich people to act preemptively. In another affluent district, a house owner got permission to build a 4-story building of studio apartments on the land plot of the owner’s 2-story house. The owner’s neighbors filed petitions to their district office to prevent the construction, citing that the studios would attract people like bar servers, presumably meaning “prostitutes.” The district office apparently found the

³⁴ The Hankyoreh August 26, 2011 internet edition.

petition reasonable enough to intervene, and persuaded the owner to build a smaller structure than originally planned.³⁵

In the case of Poi-dong, however, the district office seems to have its own interests other than merely representing the surrounding residents' "concerns." The office is reported to set aside the patch of land for sale (an estimated value of some 3.5 million dollars) to pay for other expenses and can expect more revenue in terms of fees and taxes when the land is developed. At least, it would prefer more expensive new buildings to the shantytown in its jurisdiction.³⁶ People who will get the most tangible economic gains in this affair, however, have not even been on the scene yet: developers. In the public's eyes, developers will quietly emerge on the scene after all the conflicts are resolved and do the works as the district office designates. In actuality, however, it is very likely that developers had known the plan and reckoned their bids sometimes even before the official announcement or have even been already operating behind the scene. In a sense, the surrounding residents and the district office are doing the dirty works for the developers.³⁷ And, at the same time, actions from one party presuppose those from the others.

³⁵ PRESSian November 25, 2011. The incident was reported because the incumbent President's private home at that time as well as other super-rich people's houses are located in the neighborhood.

³⁶ The facts and testimonies about the Poi-dong shantytown are found in several articles of an internet new media *PRESSian* (May 17, 2006; March, 14 2007; August 19, 2008; April 26, 2011; June 14, 2011; August 12, 2011; September 6, 2011; October 5, 2011).

³⁷ As we see in the Chapter V, outsourcing of violence is another way of getting around troubles for developers.

Possibility of Politics

The perfect storm, which originated from the surrounding residents, the district office, and potential developers, engulfed the people in the Poi-dong shantytown. Certainly, we can easily find some parallels between what happened in Poi-dong and scholarly discussions on neo-liberalism such as privatization of urban public assets based on real estate development interests (Moody 2007) and criminalization of poverty (Davis 2006[1990]). However, simply pointing out that neo-liberal globalization is the source of social ills will not do because the incident emerged amid the concrete interactions among seemingly discrete actors and how to combine or even coordinate these actions belongs to the realm of politics. Without cooperation of any of the actors, the whole operation would have been more costly to others. Just imagine what would have happened if locally powerful groups of people defended the poor people as their proper neighbors. This possibility of politics is what people I shadowed during my field work are more keenly aware of and where, I feel, our academic discourses on neo-liberalism are in want precisely due to our discursive traditions of supposing grand blueprints. According to these traditions, it is so easy to paint community activism of the left as simple reactions to the essential structural changes of neo-liberal globalization.

3. Coda

To wrap up our discussion in this chapter, let us return to the scene of the workshop discussion in the beginning. First, I argue that what they were doing is something very similar to what we academicians do with our inherited repertoires of modern scholarly discourses in the sense that what we do is analogous to measuring currents amidst a

whirlpool that might be drowning us. Second, our “denarrativized” discourses have a certain inadequacy to trace how meanings are conferred in other stories than our discourses. Third, social reality we delve into seems to be polysemous, to use an analogy with hermeneutics. In other words, the whirlpool of social change we are located in allows more than one true measurement. One of reasons why it seems that we have had unequivocal measurements is because we have vested our faiths, the depths of which may vary depending on intellectual traditions, on our measurements. Namely, how we fix more or less one definitive meaning with reference to a certain text in social reality. And yet, we are increasingly aware of the complexity and hybridity of the binaries in our discourses such as modern vs. traditional, foreign vs. native, global vs. local, and so on perhaps as globalization deepens.

Even if the notion that the social realities around us are organized on a certain grand blueprint is a myth, sometimes even a myth does its job,³⁸ just as debunking it does in other times. In our discussion, more important is interrogating to what effects the myth has been functioning. What makes the interrogation even more important is the fact that, in the context of “post-*minjung*” (post-Marxist and/or post-nationalist) South Korea where “good old” methods of enabling radicals to grasp this or that elusive blueprint have been effectively marginalized, it seems that the community activists are keeping, to some degree, the repertoires they inherited from the “good old” days of radicalism, as we have seen in what the activists and supporters of the Solidarity did in the beginning of the chapter. In the next chapter, we try to understand who they are by looking into what they

³⁸ For a discussion of ‘heroic’ modernism as an example of a functioning mythology during the inter-war period in Europe, see Harvey (1990: 31-35). And, for a broader discussion of the function of narrative in fiction and historiography, see Ricoeur (1981 Ch. 11).

do and how they operate. They were striving to grapple and negotiate with the multiple-layeredness and hybridity of social realities, and yet with their own historical inheritance.

CHAPTER III
THE HISTORICITY OF COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS:
LIFE STORIES OF THREE ACTIVISTS

The community activists I shadowed during my field work were commonly described as political left or progressive. The description is accurate enough that they would not have any objection to it, and many would be proud of being recognized as such. It does not mean, however, that there is an absolute set of criteria which distinguish those who are the progressives from those who are not. Even though one can cite ideological orientations such as an acceptance of Marxist tenets of some sorts, it should be noted that specific criteria have always been subject to and results of ideological contestations among various political factions as we see later (especially, Chapter V). In other words, the classification may be in itself a part of political processes.

Rather, the accuracy of the description reflects an assumption that most of the political forces in South Korea could (or even should) be cross-sectionally classified either as right or left (or depending on one's perspective, conservative, liberal, or progressive) under a "normal" circumstance of liberal democracy. That is to say, one of the important effects of such presupposition is to show that South Korea is more or less on the universal developmental path of industrial (meaning European, North American and sometimes Japanese) countries since such a classification system was developed largely after European historical experiences. It can be said that things are a little more complicated when such a reference to the universal is expressed in conjuncture with more sophisticated and historically trendy discourses such as those on the First, Second, and

Third Worlds or the Underdeveloped, Developing, and Developed countries. Overall, however, the reference to the universal has been working as a basis of self-fulfilling prophecy in the sense that, once a political group is placed as, say, progressive within a larger cognitive framework of political alignment, the group tends to seek a “right” political position for such a designation in reference to the supposedly universal political development. Once again, as noted above, political classification is a part of political struggles.

In another dimension, the synchronic cross-sectional classification serves social scientists very well. A common sense of classification is, above all, what makes social scientific discourses of comparative politics possible at all. For example, if we can say that the Grand National Party (*Hannaradang*, GNP) is the South Korean equivalent of the Grand Old Party in the US or that the Roh Mu Hyun presidency (2003-2007) in South Korea can be explained through the lens of the Bill Clinton Presidency in the US, it gets easier for us to say something about South Korean politics, at least in the US. Of course, enough people would know that we are sweeping some important matters under the rug to justify such comparisons.

The aim of this chapter is to expose one of the matters hidden under the rug in the cross-sectional classification, according to which we can comfortably call our activists progressives. The hidden matter here is historicity. In other words, our activists are products of historically specific circumstances with their own genealogy and temporal rhythms. The reason for doing so is not that the conventional description of them as left or progressive does not have any merits. Rather, the description is a very convenient tool with which we can easily talk about the natures of what they are doing, especially outside

of South Korea. Viewed in the spirit of the previous chapter, however, it is a little too convenient that we may miss an important aspect in their activism: the historical processes in which they have come into being as “progressives” in community politics.

In the conventional frameworks, the existence of the left (or progressives) is a more or less natural state of affairs. Meanwhile, a political alignment is thought to deserve serious academic inquiry only when the political left is conspicuously absent. For example, the existence of the left in European politics is perceived as normal while so much theoretical and empirical attention has been paid to its alleged absence in the US.³⁹ Keeping this reflection in mind, we ask the question, in what historical circumstances certain community activism emerged as the left or certain leftist activists emerged on the plane of community politics. At a different level, furthermore, the conventional frameworks give us an impression that the activists have a well-defined set of political repertoires as progressives. However, though their ideological orientations give rise to a certain set of political actions more likely than others, what constitutes “progressive-like” behaviors is far from definitive. Rather, the question of which is “progressive-like” and “unprogressive-like” itself is a part of ongoing political struggles, either among progressives or with those of other ideological orientations as we see in later chapters. For example, we left unanswered the question of why what was said in a group discussion of the Solidarity was quite similar to academic discourses in the previous chapter. An adoption of erudite discourses is a peculiar phenomenon which calls for explanation as to why such a repertoire was put into practice and it cannot be resolved with an answer such as “that is what progressives naturally do” however it seems to be so.

³⁹ Howard Kimeldorf (1988) is one of those who raise this issue.

1. Existing Views on the Historical Development of South Korean Progressives

It is not the case, however, that existing scholarly works are entirely devoid of historical perspectives. Indeed, existing works are filled with historical accounts of how the left emerged and developed. Usually, such historical accounts consist of two competing but not necessarily contradictory lines of story. One of the storylines tells us that the emergence of the left in the 1970s and 1980s owed much to the momentum of the repressive state-centered rapid industrialization. The leftist social movements in these periods were newly mobilized industrial workers', as well as left-behind farmers' and urban poor people's reactions to what the state and capitalists did in the course of industrialization. For example, Shin, Kwang-Yeong (1994: 193, 197-200) argues that, due to the colonial legacy of an "over-developed" state and "under-developed" civil society, even trade unions were used as a method of state and capitalists' repression during the industrialization. The democratic (read independent) labor union movements in the 1970s and 1980s engaged in militant and radical struggles to counter repressive labor practices predominantly characterized by state violence and the domination of "puppet" (*eo-yong*) trade unions (Shin, Kwang-Yeong 1994:201-207). Similarly, Cho, Don-Moon (2011: 134-135) argues that the ideological radicalness and militancy were "natural" reactions to the circumstance where anti-governmental independent labor union activities were virtually prohibited and that the enthusiasm of radical student-turned-worker activists helped to sustain the movements despite high personal costs of engaging in militant struggles year after year.

In the second storyline, which concerns ideological developments of South Korean radicalism, student movements almost always take center stage. According to this

storyline, two major strands of *minjung* radicalism can be traced back to a series of ideological debates among student activists in the 1980s (especially, “NL-PD debates” in the late 1980s). For instance, when he analyzes a series of factional conflicts within the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) in the mid-2000s, which ultimately caused the split of the DLP into the DLP and New Progressive Party (NPP) in 2008, Jeong, Yeong-Tae (2011) characterizes the conflicts as those between “NL” and “PD” factions both of which were originated in student movements, following the nearly consensual usage of the terms among party members as well as outside observers. His characterization shows that the ideological hegemony of intellectual activists, since a lot of student activists started to organize workers, farmers and urban poor people in the 1980s, has still been effective long after the original propositions of NLPDR (National Liberation People’s Democratic Revolution) theories became theoretically and practically obsolete due to changing political circumstances, such as the collapse of the Eastern Block and the democratic transition in South Korea. We discuss the specific meanings of all the terms with strange initials above later in Chapter V. What is important in the context of our discussion here is the fact that something that originated in university student movement circles two decades before still constituted the major dividing line among progressives.

Whereas the first storyline emphasizes the significance of working people as the driving force of social movements, the second story implicitly shows that intellectual-activists with radical ideas were the main leaders of the movements. Certainly, both storylines seem to be truthful enough. South Korean working people have been struggling against their oppressors and their struggles are historically comparable to leftist activities in other (especially European) countries, just as depicted in the first storyline. And, it is

also true that a vast majority of activists who led the struggles in the 1980s were largely Leninist revolutionaries as the second version shows.

By combining these facts, however, can we conclude that people's struggles in the 1980s were revolutionary in their basic characteristics? This curious mixture of working people and intellectual-activists were not entirely devoid of tensions. From the beginning, as Namhee Lee (2007: 246-251) argues, the Leninist vanguardism⁴⁰ of student activists in the 1980s was not entirely free from patronizing attitudes towards workers in activists' writings about working people, even though what the activists tried to do was to seamlessly fuse themselves into working people. Implicit tension was often made explicit between intellectual-student activists who pushed forth long-term political agendas and some working people who preferred to seek more tangible immediate gains, as Nancy Abelmann (1996: 140-149) shows in a case of farmers' movements.⁴¹

The existence of tension seems to caution us not to easily concede to a simple characterization of social movements of the 1980s as revolutionary. There was too much ambiguity. The activists' ideological motivations were revolutionary and they quite explicitly talked about the liberation of working people from oppression. But what they

⁴⁰ The question of why the activists specifically adopted Leninism for their activism especially in the 1980s is a very interesting topic in its own right. For now, let us just take it as a historical fact, following the existing literature.

⁴¹ Abelmann's observation below (1996: 69) seems to exemplify such tensions between activists and people they are organizing.

As the protest intensified and spiraled into violence, some farmers were swept into the spirit and politics of confrontation, while others chose to retreat. As one man, decrying the escalation of violence put it, "This is a *sojak changui* [tenant war], right? But it is becoming a *sahoe undong* [social movement] and that isn't good." With this comment he implied that social movements are broad-based, ongoing forces, whereas the aims and duration of tenant struggles are limited. (original italics and brackets)

did, such as organizing labor unions and staging strikes to improve working conditions, was far short of what would bring about a revolution. Repressive state apparatuses and mainstream media painted them as communist agitators, but the description did not fit the picture of what the activists did in the eyes of working people, because what they did was largely helping people resolve their everyday grievances. Sometimes working people recognized that activists pushed affairs in unwanted radical directions too hard and made objections. These interactions, between the repressive state, radical activists and working people, required delicate politics for all the parties involved to begin with. If this is the case in the supposedly revolutionary 1980s, why should we be content with the description that community activists are progressives in the 2010s?

2. In the Right Place at the Right Time: Life Stories of the Community Activists

Before looking at how community activists operate, let us first try to understand how they became activists, focusing on our key informants' life stories that they told me in the first interviews. What experiences did they have as youths and young adults and how did they relate the experiences to what they do now? Were the conduits which connected student activism with social activism in the 1980s still working in the 1990s? If so, what were the specific mechanisms? What factors influenced them when they decided to engage in community activism?

(1) In-Ho

In-Ho had been a head of the Basecamp since its founding in the late 2000s, and the chairperson of Port district members' council of the NPP after the 2008 split (and of the

DLP before). The titles made him one of the more recognizable figures in the progressive bloc as well as local politics in the Port district. He had been nurturing progressive politics on barren soils of the Port district, which had little history of progressive politics.

Youth Years

When asked about his youth, his response was that he grew up with little memory of his father because his father died when he was very young. One-parent families used to be commonly called “lacked” (*gyeolson gajeong*), usually more stigmatized when the father is absent as “a kid without the father”, along with the “handicapped,” is one of curse words in South Korea. His mother was very careful not to make her sons victims of such a prejudice. From this experience, he reasoned, he was able to develop a sensitivity to any form of social prejudices. Other than that, he thought he had been a quiet and “ordinary kid” whose presence in schools would not be easily noticed by teachers. He just enjoyed keeping company with friends and using humorous words. Soon, his story started to remind me of some traces of the 1980s. He liked history, especially Korean ancient history with heavily nationalistic tones. He would search for further study in a Zen-type religious teaching (*Danhakseowon*). The enthusiasm for both ancient history and traditional culture were quite in fashion in the 1980s, along with traditional peasant music (*pungmul*), mask dancing (*talchum*), and “front-yard” (or open space) theatrical performance (*madanggeuk*).⁴² Also, he acquainted himself with radical books from his college student brother’s shelves. He admired one of his brother’s friends. The friend was smart and articulate, both of which seem to be the typical characteristics of activist

⁴² Namhee Lee (2007 Ch. 5) analyzes these cultural activities as instances of South Korean counter-(hegemonic) public sphere.

students. One day, the friend committed a suicide by setting himself on fire in a public place to advance a political cause. The news stunned him, along with his brother. His admiration of the friend seemed to linger to today, as he told me that he had been visiting the friend's cinerarium from time to time, although his brother had not since the incident. After the graduation of high school, he failed to get into college year after year until he finally got into an art college majoring in photography. That was only after several failed attempts and compulsory military service.

Young Adult Years

During these years, he turned to night-school (*yahak*) movements. I imagine that he would have involved in student movements if he would have been admitted to a university. Historically, night-schools were for those who hoped to gain the qualifications necessary for secondary and higher education. For example, if one passes an annual high school degree qualifying examination hosted by government, the individual is qualified to apply for higher educational institutions. Holding degrees had practical as well as symbolic implications when educational qualifications were closely related with one's wage and chance of promotion in the workplaces in the industrializing South Korea. At the same time, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the level of educational attainment was one of the various factors which could bolster one's social status as a respectable human being. For these reasons, night-schools attracted various kinds of people including seniors who missed their chances to get education, young workers who had to work during the day, adolescents who could not adapt to formal school environments and so on. For activist-minded college students, night-schools provided one

with “experiences on the ground” (*hyeonjang kyeonheom*) of having relatively long-term relationships with “real” *minjung* (underprivileged ordinary working people) who were usually abstracted in their social scientific books. It was a kind of experience that college campuses did not always supply. Perhaps because of the flammable combination of radical activists with young workers and disoriented juveniles, night-schools tended to be the spreading grounds of radical ideas. Sometimes, teachers and students joined protest events together on occasions like May Day.⁴³

In his night-school, In-Ho became one of teachers who were predominantly college students despite the fact that he had not been a college student. In his recollection, his non-student status helped him develop closer relationships with young night-school students because he was perceived as sharing more similar circumstances with the students than his college student counterparts. “I was kind of a big brother who could understand the students’ situations better than other teachers,” he seemed to be fond of remembering those days.

In a sense, his contact with social activism in the early 1990s depended on the existence of the night-school which had been operating since the 1980s. He seemed to be conscious of his non-college student status. Although he did not talk about any difficulty in teaching he might have faced as a non-college student and even saw it as advantageous in building relationships with the students, he positioned himself between the teachers and the students, rather than among the teachers. We may even suspect that he might be marginal among the activist teacher circle. Nevertheless, the organization provided a

⁴³ A question of how effective the spread of radical ideas was in night-schools is an interesting research topic. I do not attempt to make any remark on this issue in the context of our discussion because I think separate research designs are necessary to deal with the topic properly. For a historical account from the perspective of an activist, see Cheon (2009).

socially respectable outlet to express and nurture inchoate radical sentiments that he had developed in his youth. Without the venue, the ideas could have been easily lost in the middle of everyday affairs. He did not have to come from student activism to be involved in social activism precisely because the night-school provided him with an opportunity firmly established by earlier activists.

Political Career

Later, In-Ho volunteered for the progressive candidate Kwon Young Ghil's first presidential campaign in 1997. "I was just happy for the fact that we were going to have a political party representing *minjung*." Initially, he just visited the campaign headquarters to let them know that he was eager to work for them. Probably in need of helping hands, why should they turn away such a night-school activist as him? He started right away. After the election, the DLP was established on the basis of the Kwon campaign. In-Ho became a reporter for the party magazine perhaps thanks to his photographic skills. After a few years working as a reporter, he was sent to the Port district to be the chief secretary for the local party members council. Soon, he needed to find a candidate for the approaching National Assembly (NA) member election in 2004. Finding a candidate did not turn out to be easy given that the candidate would have to miss his/her earnings during the election period and, instead, spend a large sum of personal savings for virtually no hope of getting elected because of the party's very narrow support base. Whenever he exhorted an individual who he thought to be suitable to run, their responses were "you should run, not me." After much contemplation, he finally decided to run as a candidate in his early 30s, which was (and still is) not common in South Korean politics.

In the election, he garnered some 5 percent of the votes, clearly not enough to get elected. Subsequently, he chaired the local council. One day in the early stage of my field work, he boasted “I have chaired a local council longer than anyone else in the entire progressive parties.” Then, he explained that the remark did not come out of pride, but out of bitterness. One of the reasons why he remained as the chair of a local council was due to the fact that he did not get a national level leadership position in either the DLP or the NPP.⁴⁴ As a local leader, he played an instrumental role in founding the Basecamp and had run it since its founding. The Basecamp was launched successfully as some of the national news media praised it as a new experiment on community activism. Although he may not be a prominent party leader at the national level, it seems certain that In-Ho became an important party leader at least on the local scene.

From his point of view, his political career is the result of his conscious search for an alternative to what dominated South Korean politics of the time. Similarly, he looked for non-conventional teachings through history, radical social scientific books or in a traditional religious sect earlier in his life. It seems that the DLP emerged at the right moment for him just as the night-school existed as a venue for his radical sensibility as if waiting for him. However, In-Ho did not quite anticipate what he would engage in community activism in the Port district when he joined the Kwon campaign, similarly as the authors of the autobiographical book in the previous chapter did not foresee approaching social transformations when they “decided” not to get educated. His moral outrage against social injustice and the radical imagination of an alternative society in the 1980s needed the right organizations like the night-school and the local progressive party,

⁴⁴ In fact, it was a joke but I could not find it funny at the moment of hearing it. It took me a while to realize that his remark was the kind of humor he often enjoyed with fellow staffs.

to blossom into his community activism. In a sense, by running the Basecamp, he was giving other people the opportunities to nurture similar yearnings for alternative society.

(2) Bo-Ram

Bo-Ram was a first-term district council member of the Forest district when my fieldwork began. Her first 4-year term was characterized by a series of local political confrontations against other members of the district council and the district office. And the confrontations made her a rare popular progressive local politician, even getting some national attentions from the media. The first confrontation put her on the verge of being expelled from the council, but she was rescued by favorable public opinion and protest rallies by local people. Her team's uncovering of then-district head's wrong doings effectively caused him to forfeit his bid for a second term. "I was lucky enough to have a once-in-a-decade political chance several times during my first term," one day she recalled. In my view, however, her political skills helped her seize the opportunities when they were presented. In any case, her actions were quite remarkable as the only progressive member in the council that consisted of more than 10 members either from the GNP or the DP.

Youth Years

Bo-Ram also described herself as an "ordinary kid" in her youth. It seems, however, that she was not as quiet as In-Ho. She was born in a four-generation household of a matrilineal line. She lived with great-grand parents, grandparents, parents, maternal uncles and an aunt, and her brother. Bo-Ram lived in a poor neighborhood near a waste

dumping site in Seoul. She would smell the stink of garbage when it was cloudy. However, she did not long for material goods so much because the adults provided her with emotional support, thanks to her status as the eldest kid in the extended family. Even after her family's independence, her relatives lived geographically close to her family. The neighborhood she lived in had some communal culture in which seniors felt entitled to scold any kids in the neighborhood for their wrong doings. She had not had her own room until marriage. The life in her youth was characterized by constant interactions with all sorts of adults inside and outside of the household. When asked whether such experiences helped her in her local politics, she responded positively because she thought a major part of her jobs was meeting people of all sorts sometimes without any preparation. Her response was improvised and maybe a little stretched largely due to the fact that I pressed her to make a connection through my question of "do you think what happened in your youth has anything to do with what you are doing now?" Nevertheless, her response needs to be taken seriously in reconsidering the compatibility between communal culture and modern politics.⁴⁵

"I was moderately diligent and just above average in academics during my middle school years," Bo-Ram recalled. As one who received a "work scholarship" (*geunro janghakgeum*) due to her family's financial difficulty, she tried hard to meet teachers' expectations for her since, she half-jokingly suggested, she was sensitive to others' evaluation of her. Still close friends of hers provided a lot of cultural experiences otherwise unavailable to her due to a lack of money. Meanwhile, "nothing memorable happened in the high school years," Bo-Ram remembered. "I was one of those students

⁴⁵ We discuss this issue later in this chapter and in the next chapter when we talk about election.

who arrived at school earlier than others because the commuting distance was quite long and my parents did not care to transfer me to another closer school. Coming to school early, I thought a lot about various things but aimlessly wasted time at that time. If I am asked what part of my life I would relive, my answer would definitely be high school.” One memorable thing was that she was elected as the head of her class year after year “just because the classmates liked” her. She would be kicked out of class or almost get hit during class time by some of the teachers a few times while she protested the teachers’ unreasonable treatments of her. As if influenced by her personality, her class mates as a collective usually performed poorly when it comes to academics but were so unique that the teachers’ attitudes toward them were usually polarized between extreme favor and hatred.⁴⁶ When pressed about any influence by the political atmosphere in the 1980s, she was not quite sure about it. Instead, she cited an example. When she joined students from other girls’ schools in the Seoul area to participate in an educational camp program hosted by an educational foundation, the students in her room, at night, talked about disputes around the issue of teachers union established at the time. The next day, they were called to be cautioned. She suspected that her room was eavesdropped on and she thought that she saw an insidious aspect of public authority. The political atmosphere in the late 1980s was reflected in the fact that an anti-government student activist leader, famous for evading arrest attempts several times, was popular among her peers. “We did not know anything about his political ideology. He was just like a famous basketball player,” she said.

⁴⁶ In most of the South Korean secondary schools, students do not move around to find the right classrooms except when discipline specific equipment or a facility is required such as music, art and physical exercise class. Instead, classmates stayed together all day long in one classroom designated for them. Finding the right classrooms according to the class schedules is one of the teachers’ duties.

Young Adult Years

The vague political sensibility was expressed through activism only after she got into a university in the early 1990s. Beginning with the vice-representative of her cohorts, she was always in the middle of the student association (*haksaenghoe*; SA) movements during her college years. SAs were the public façade of the radical student movements of that time. A dual structure of public SAs and concealed networks of activists (sometimes called “under[ground] tables” or UTs) in student movements was a response to the repression from the public authority in the 1980s. In the early 1990s, however, student association movements started to change in a couple of aspects. As the political environment became less repressive, a lot of underground student movement factions, mostly from the minority “pan-PD line,”⁴⁷ became more public although the majority “NL line” factions were mostly still hidden. Because the dual structure of SAs and UTs became more visible, the traditional view of SAs mainly as the body of political struggles was increasingly questioned (mostly by the “pan-PD” political organizations). In the context of our discussion, we do not explore the organizational strategy debates in detail. What is important for our discussion here is that in the early 1990s, the pressure for re-adjusting the role of SAs started to build, although SAs never abandoned their political struggles until the virtual collapse of the movement in the late 1990s. This pressure was an important reason why universities, especially those with corrupt private owners such

⁴⁷ To explain briefly with the risk of oversimplification, this group of factions emphasized on class struggle over anti-American struggle and was implicitly or explicitly hostile to North Korea. Meanwhile, their political rival “NL” factions emphasized on the “restoration” of political and economic autonomy of Korean nation from the imperial domination of the US and at least tacitly viewed North Korea as the strategic alliance for their struggle. More discussion about student movement factions can be found in Chapter V.

as Bo-Ram's school, became the targets of the student movement and the fights between universities and student activists were sometimes as fierce as the anti-government struggles.

As an SA leader, Bo-Ram spent time in conducting student movements during the day and drinking during the night, missing a lot of classes.⁴⁸ Although she engaged in politically oriented activism, one of her main focuses was extending students' rights in university operations, even including students' participation in professor hiring processes. She led a sit-in strike against the university. In the process of wrapping up the strike, she was expelled from the university and reinstated later during the Kim Dae Jung administration (1998-2002). After the reinstatement, she became the head of the student welfare committee of her university SA and organized cultural events for students like movie screenings. What she did after reinstated reflected the changing characteristics of SAs from political organizations to service providers for students. As an activist, she witnessed overall student movements collapsing. Upon graduation, she felt lost.

Similarly as the night-school existed for In-Ho, Bo-Ram was attracted to student activism through the SA of her university. The SA happened to fit her personality and she decided to go along without knowing the consequences of her decision or anticipating what the decision would mean for her life in the future. When she joined the SA movement, It was standing at the beginning of the tumultuous changes in the 1990s. In addition, she ideologically belonged to the "pan-PD line" largely due to the fact that the "pan-PD line" was the dominant group on her campus, rather uncommonly among the

⁴⁸ During the interview, she confessed that she did not know even Japanese alphabets despite the fact that she majored in Japanese literature.

universities in the Seoul area. She was not exactly aware how her factional affiliation would affect her later.

Political Career

After graduation, she contemplated on what to do. She was not prepared for any jobs desired by college graduates. “I thought I could start from something like dish-washing. But, that did not sound right.” At that time, she got a phone-call from someone she knew during her activism in the regional SA federation. The individual who called was preparing for an NA member election on the DLP ticket. He wanted her to be a party member which required party dues of ten thousand won (roughly, 10 dollars) per month. For her, the money did not matter thinking “I can live with or without the money.” The day she visited the local office of the party with an application, she started to work for them. “It looked like they were in need of hands. So, I told them I was going to work for them. First of all, I was happy for the fact that we had a legitimate [progressive] party operating in our area.” She worked for his election campaign unpaid for some 2 months and was hospitalized, she thought, from fatigue after the election ended. Soon, she started to work again although, this time, she was paid with three hundred thousand won (roughly, 300 dollars) a month. Even then, she was paid more than other staff because she was responsible for additional work in the office. The candidate set up a legal consulting operation within the office with progressive-minded lawyers whom he personally knew. Her income was far less than one could make doing other things. But she still could afford to drink a lot thanks to some of her friends. “I feel obliged to do something good for them,” she added. With this small salary, however, it turned out that she could not

sustain this lifestyle for long. The difficult financial situation compelled her to find another job.

A phone-call at the right moment provided gave her an unanticipated path. Although the job was available to anybody, what mattered was one of her personal connections forged through what she did in the past. In addition, although she was doing a socially valuable work of providing legal consulting, not otherwise easily accessible to workers, the amount of income was too meager to sustain her. This small amount of income reflects a general South Korean social condition under which publicly minded works outside of ordinary labor market were not sustainable if a respectable level of wages was to be paid. Bo-Ram's work was sustained by her devotion. This condition forced Bo-Ram to rely on family members and friends, and to eventually quit the work and look for another job in the end.

Bo-Ram's alternative was working for a tutoring company. Out of her progressive political disposition, she joined a trade union as soon as she finished the basic training. The union was fighting with another company at the time. Although the grievances of workers in the industry were similar, when she exhorted other teachers to join the union, they treated her as if she was out of her mind. Workers in this industry are officially classified as "special employees." What makes them "special" is that, although they are hired by tutoring companies, they are self-employed on paper. Individual teachers are supposed to manage "their own" customers and keeping more customers makes an individual teacher look better. A problem is that managers of the companies implicitly and sometimes explicitly pressure their workers to inflate the number of customers through fake enrollments and unreported drop-outs so that the companies can

collect more fees from their workers. She organized teachers as a “teachers’ association,” avoiding “union” in the name. The “association” helped the teachers to “shed” their “fakes” and “holdings” (unreported drop-outs) by shielding them from the managers’ pressure. In her recollection, her some fifty co-workers “shed” several hundreds of “fakes” and “holdings” under the protection of the “association.” Labor agreements with the management were subsequently signed, just as unions do. Some of the teachers joined the industry-wide union. It took her three years to arrive at that point. After the “association” seemed stable, she decided to pursue another career: running for a district council member election on the DLP ticket.

What were the differences, for Bo-Ram’s co-workers, between the initial perception of her as a radical “union” agitator and the later position of a respected “association” leader? Was she trying to organize a union or “simply” resolve her co-workers’ grievances? Is it only a matter of naming or qualitative differences? As noted above, she became a tutor not because she wanted to organize a union but because she was desperate to earn a living. Nevertheless, she ended up becoming a union-like “association” leader despite the co-workers’ unfavorable perception of unions. The result seems to be possible by three dispositions of her; (1) she was able to keenly detect what her co-workers’ main concerns in the workplace were, namely “fakes” and “holdings,” (2) she had a moral sensibility to see injustice in the managerial practice of pressuring her co-workers to keep the “fakes” and “holdings,” and could not stand the unreasonable treatment, and (3) she knew how to organize people and how to protect the co-workers from the watchful eyes of the managers. These dispositions were formed and acquired, especially from her student movement experiences.

Bo-Ram ended up in third place in the election but became a council member because her electoral precinct elected three of the candidates.⁴⁹ The first incident that made her famous occurred when she balked at the council member remuneration raise proposal from the district office. The percentage of a raise is usually determined by the Ministry of Administration and Security in the central government because most local governments depend more than half of their revenues on “subsidies” from the central government. Formally, district councils can approve it on their discretion during the annual budget review. But usually the issue is not a matter debated because most council members are happy to take the raise silently before outsiders notice the raise. In the Forest district, however, the political situation became complicated as Bo-Ram refused the proposal and took the issue to the public. Soon, her team took to the street and started a petition drive against the raise for district council members. Media coverage and public opinion were favorable to her action because it was perceived as a matter of giving more money to already relatively well-paid people with a dubious job. With the media coverage, the DLP started to promote her case as something a progressive politician would do when he/she is elected: bravely doing right things for public good.⁵⁰

On top of the popularity acquired from the first incident, the second incident made her an unquestionable icon of progressive politics. The incident started with the district office’s attempt to charge residents more fees on waste collection. The district outsourced waste collection service to a private company. In her mind, the company must

⁴⁹ We discuss the specifics of local elections in the next chapter.

⁵⁰ In my view, a chance to debate about the worth of the public works of local politicians was lost in the process rather unfortunately because progressive politicians tend to need more public resources than their counterparts from major parties. “I was popularity-oriented at that time,” she commented when I broached the issue in our conversation during my fieldwork.

be behind the district office's proposed plan. Initially she agreed to pass the plan on the condition that the company would contribute more to the district revenue. The company refused her counter-proposal. In response, her team took the issue to the public and started another petition drive against the waste collection fee raise proposal. Her decision was popular and even a supporters' group was formed through internet. In both cases, she won because she could gather public support rallying behind her. These politically savvy moves proved that she was an able politician even in her first term.

All these began with a simple phone-call from the NA member election candidate and it seems very reasonable to suspect that she could not have become a popular politician without progressive party movements which resulted in the DLP. However, what was the key to her success? Was it her ideology or past movement experiences including personal connections forged through her experiences? As in the case of organizing teachers, a demarcation between the two does not seem to be very clear. Rather, two things are inseparably jumbled with each other. For one thing, in order to do what she did, one does not have to have experiences of radical activism and personal connections from these experiences. The issues were not anywhere near radically undermining power holders' domination. The favorable public opinions and coverage from not particularly progressive media show that her actions were not explicitly ideological at least in the South Korean context of that time. At the same time, the past experiences and connections worked pretty well for her. In a sense, she exploited popular distrusts toward public institutions rather successfully, which has much to do with ideological orientations of distrusts on existing public institutions in her past student movement experiences. In addition, the political repertoires of street demonstrations and

petition drives were readily available for her team because the team members were trained for doing such repertoires for an extensive period of time during their student activism. More fundamentally, the question of discriminating between these two factors may come out of a necessity of academic discourses, rather than practicality. She did not seem to care about which is which. What was important for her was whether such strategies worked.

(3) Moon-Su

Moon-Su was the chief of the staff of the Solidarity in the Mountain district. He was the organizer of the strategy meetings we have briefly examined at the beginning of the Chapter II. In the beginning of the first interview, he told me that he was not a stranger to telling his life story because he had some experiences of running a story-telling program before. The program was a part of the Solidarity's attempt to organize local women into volunteer community activists. Perhaps thanks to the experience, he began his story of growing-up as if rehearsed before, and his story seemed to be a concisely summarized version. I had to interrupt him several times with follow-up questions for more information.

Youth Years

He began his story with an excuse that he did not remember many things before the age of five (who does, anyway?). When reconstructed with photos and fragmented memories, it seemed that he lived in shantytowns when very young. At one point of time, he was separated from his parents, implying that they were too poor to keep him with them. He

remembered that he had played a lot with his uncles. Even after his parents “settled,” running a small school-supply shop, the family had only one room (attached to the shop) which was used simultaneously as bedroom, living room, and perhaps dining room as well. Adult neighbors visited the room a lot to discuss their personal concerns with his mother as if it were a communal house. He hated the visits because of the lack of privacy. He was not sure that such a background of poverty could be directly connected to what he had been doing as an adult. Then, he jumped to the college period. At that point, I had to slow him down asking about the secondary school years in the 1980s.

It does not seem that Moon-Su was exactly an exemplary student. He started drinking and smoking around the age of 15 because “they were what we did when friends came together.” Drinking and smoking became a source of familial conflicts a couple of years later when he and his friends were caught by police while “boldly” drinking in a bar located in front of a police station. In his recollection, his group was a bunch of disaffected teenagers. They shared a common sense of how unsavory life is. Especially, he had a lot of conversations with a friend whose mother was thought to be an illegitimate wife to a man. In his memories, the friend was even more disaffected than him because the conflicts with the “proper” wife and half-brothers were unbearable.

Also, the group talked a lot about what they would do in the future. He wanted to be a social worker at that time. Although he did not have even a vague idea of what social workers do, his desire to do something good for poor people was manifested in such a way. One day, he was asked to help one of his friends evict a tenant family. To honor their friendship, he helped. The process involved physical struggles. When drinking the night after the incident, he regretted what he had just done. Although it was hard to put the

feeling to words, he felt something was terribly wrong with the incident.

There was another incident that affected his view on society. At some point, there was a series of car torching incidents in his neighborhood. After several unpleasant contacts with police officers, he knew some of the neighborhood policemen. One day, his group was stopped by police officers to be searched and the officers found a large pack of matches carried by one of the friends. From that moment, they started to be accused of committing the arsons. Although released at night, he thought he had seen a sinister face of public authority.

At the school, in addition, he lost a teacher in the middle of a teachers union dispute. The teacher was not funny and popular. Rather, he was respected among students for his seriousness and Moon-Su also respected the teacher. Upon hearing the news of his leaving the school, he stopped by the teacher's desk to let the teacher know that he was respected. "I can still picture the scene in which the teacher departed from the school," he added. When pressed, he revealed some experiences for which he was surprised to find some relevance to what he had been doing. It would be a stretch however to argue that these experiences were some of the "causes." He did not think so, either. Instead, what he was developing was some vague moral sensibility that injustice was pervasive in the society. This sensibility was soon to be expressed through radical political language he acquired during his college years.

Young Adult Years

He ended up majoring in architecture in college rather than the social work he wanted to do when he was a teenager. Soon, he became close to some of the cohort members in his

department. Because one of them liked reading, they decided to approach the book club at the university. “I could not understand what they were talking about except that they were reading mostly social science books. But, because they looked nice and promised to buy drinks, we decided to join the club.” In his recollection, the experiences were generally pleasant. “While high school education was all about memorizing stuff, the book club was about reflecting on what we had read, sharing the ideas and becoming aware of what was going on in the society.” The members socialized over drinks and the processes involved a lot of singing and talking.⁵¹

It seems that he received a largely “NL-line education” (or indoctrination), the general content of which can be explained, with the risk of oversimplification, as follows: South Korea is viewed as “colonized” by the US and removing US domination over Korea through unification with the North is one of the most important tasks of the time. “I cried a lot after watching a film about the Gwangju Uprising⁵² recorded by a German reporter, without anyone hitting me or anything. I was shocked by the facts that our soldiers could kill our own civilians and the US was involved in the process. Sheer anger and frustration made me cry.” I asked whether he had any revulsion toward the seemingly dangerous radical ideas at first. “[The radical ideas] were forcefully pressed into my mind.

⁵¹ This night time socialization was not so different from that practiced by SAs as hinted in the case of Bo-Ram. Generally, however, university clubs had a bit different characteristics from SAs. While SAs were public institutions where any students could come and go, clubs were characterized by more tight and private relationships which could linger well after graduation. It was not uncommon to see the graduated (so-called “Old Boys” or OBs) visit the club buying food and drinks at the time.

⁵² The incident started with then a pro-democracy leader Kim Dae Jung’s arrest in the spring of 1980 after General Chun Doo Hwan became the *de facto* ruler, following the assassination of President Park Chung Hee in the late 1979. In the end, many of protesters in a south-western city of Gwangju were killed by airborne units (the official number is some 200 which is not trusted by many).

In retrospect, I think that the ideas could have been suggested in more refined ways. But, at that time, I believed that what we talked about was the truth.”

He became a serious activist who took to the street during the day and went to bars at night, missing many of his classes. At least, serious enough that police bothered to let his parents know he was a student activist. Like many activists of the time, he sought to avoid military conscription to continue the activist career. One could just hide in one place after another where no neighbors know his identity. He chose a “legal” option in which he postponed conscription by applying for state-granted skill certificate exams. At one point, however, his parents became aware of what he was doing and begged him to join the army, which he did. In the army, he witnessed the student movements collapsing. He found their strategies unsavory because of anachronistically violent methods student activists maintained and let his friends know about his feeling when he was off-duty. After discharged, he decided not to go back to the campus.

As in the cases of In-Ho and Bo-Ram, Moon-Su became an activist through a social institution functioning as an activist organization which was constructed in the 1980s. Becoming an activist started with a fortuitous event for him. He contacted the book club without exactly understanding what they were doing prior to his joining. Moon-Su joined the book club not because he wanted to be an activist but because he was looking for pleasant social relationships in his university. It is not denying, however, that he made his own decisions. If determined, he could have left the club. As we have seen in the case of Bo-Ram, the student movements were changing. Political liberalization and consumerist abundance started to inundate South Korea universities (Abelmann 1996: 226-236) in the first half of the 1990s. Only when he could see from the outside of

student activism during his military service, Moon-Su started to sense that there was something that was not quite right in student movements. Unlike Bo-Ram who held onto student movements until graduation, Moon-Su left the movement, without necessarily abandoning his ideological orientations.

Activist Career

His alternative to student movements was night-school movements. His encounter with this alternative activism was no less fortuitous than his joining the student movements was. In searching for alternatives, he became aware that someone he had known was working for a night-school in the Mountain district. The occasion was also marked by the beginning of his long tenure of activism in the Mountain district. The school was a firmly established institution with a long history going back to the 1980s and even a semi-public school status⁵³ of “high civic school” (*godeung gongmin hakkyo*). Also, teachers in the school were explicit about their pro-worker orientation. In addition to regular curricula, they taught labor-related law for practical purposes. He seemed to be fond of remembering the period. “Night-school was a good venue to meet real people, not abstracted ones in books. I worked as a construction worker to show the students that I was also a part of working class. Education there was about changing oneself and others around through learning from each other. I was impressed by concrete changes in our lives through the interactions we had. I was so impressed that I was even planning to further engage in educational movements, something like education-mediated community

⁵³ The “semi-public” means that the school can grant certificates recognized as corresponding to regular public school diplomas by government. It was a sub-tier to the regular educational system intended to provide basic education for adults as well as regular school drop-outs.

building.” Moon-Su and I did not discuss deeply what “changing oneself and others” meant. My impression from our conversation was that education is an enlightenment process in which a person improves his/her understanding of the society around him/her and helps others do the same through interpersonal interactions, something similar to what Paulo Freire (2000[1968]) preached.

Working as a construction worker was not necessarily a pretentious act. In fact, it can be said that he was a part of working people except the fact that he had a few more options than his students. The options included the fact that he could have a better paying job to save some money for fulfilling his wish of traveling abroad when he quit the night-school. When he was about to leave the country, he got a request to help a progressive candidate for a local election, which he did. After the election, he found that the saved money was largely gone and he was a little disoriented about what to do next. At the time, he got a suggestion to join the Solidarity to organize renting unit apartment residents. He had been working for the Solidarity since then.

Moon-Su could continue his activist career because a series of opportunities were presented to him and he welcomed the opportunities. The night-school was a firm base on which he could practice his ideas. In addition, because the school happened to be located in the Mountain district, he could occupy other positions which were related to the Mountain district. He could have left the district to realize his wish to travel abroad, yet he chose to stay.

3. Influences of the Past Experiences

All of the activists we have seen so far started to be involved in activism in their early 20s in the early years of the 1990s. Student activism-related social institutions such as night-schools, SAs, and university clubs were instrumental to their becoming activists. In-Ho became a community activist by way of a night-school and a progressive party movement. Bo-Ram's involvement in activism started with SA movements and local progressive party activities. It was the experiences in a university club and a night-school that forged Moon-Su into someone who participated in community activism. Although we do not know how typical their paths were, it can be said that they might not be community activists if these institutions were devoid of activist cultures which originated largely in the 1980s. At the same time, however, the image of Leninist vanguards portrayed in many works on the 1980s, portray committed student activists as going among people to organize them, but this does not exactly fit what we have seen so far. It seems that there were always some fortuitous turn of events, such as a phone-call and elections that led them to where they were.

It has been clear, I hope, that the community activists whose life stories we have discussed have past activist experiences with radical ideological orientations. As hinted earlier in this chapter, however, the relationship between these experiences and what they were doing is less than obvious. For example, we have briefly looked at the earlier development of the free school lunch program initiative in the introduction. It was proposed by the DLP and pushed by progressive groups only to be rejected by the GNP dominated city council and successive GNP mayors. There was little intrinsically progressive about the initiative, however. In fact, in the 2010 local elections, the largely

liberal DP adopted the initiative as one of their major slogans in the Seoul area. The progressives might feel that the slogan was stolen but it would not be strange to see any party proposing similar initiatives. Later when the DP controlled city council confronted the GNP mayor, the mayor counter-proposed a free school-supply program instead of free school lunches. Then why could only the progressives conceive such an initiative? One plausible answer seems that they were more capable of proposing down-to-earth political initiatives, thanks to their past experiences of activism.

(1) Ambiguity in Ideological Changes

The activists we have talked about so far seldom thought that they were the same people they were in some fifteen years before, when they were influenced by radical ideologies. For one thing, In-Ho and Moon-Su both half-jokingly told me that they were not as enthusiastic about social activism as they had been when they were younger. It is perhaps because they were not as energetic or passionate as they got older, their activism became a work routine, or they sensed the lack of recognition or rewards from others in the society. What is more important in the context of our discussion, however, seems to be their change from totalizing revolutionary ideologies to an emphasis on the practicality of resolving concrete everyday concerns. “I used to think that achieving national autonomy from the US through the national unification with North Korea would solve all the social problems in the society. Now, I see a lot of things which need to be done locally, although I still believe the national unification is important,” said Moon-Su in the first interview. In this regard, Bo-Ram went even further. “I am even willing to run naked on a school

ground if somebody promised me that my doing so would increase governmental welfare expenditures substantially,”⁵⁴ she said in the wrap-up interview.

Meanwhile, during the preliminary interview, In-Ho made an objection to my suggestion that there has been an ideological rupture in the progressive politics. According to him, whatever is said in academic books and activist pamphlets, social activism has always been trying to address concrete down-to-earth concerns of working people, regardless of whether it was in the 1980s or in the 2000s. In-Ho’s point, however, does not seem to be his endorsement of totalizing ideologies of the past radicalism. To the contrary, it seems that by saying so, he attempted to place what he was doing in the mainstream of the progressive politics. After the local elections which we explore in the next chapter, In-Ho contributed an article to a leftist internet news medium.⁵⁵ In the article, he claimed that (1) education is one of the most important “class issues” of the time, (2) one of his candidates could win the election based on education issues, and therefore (3) he and his candidate won the election by framing it around a class issue. When I mentioned the article in the first interview, he smiled a little. In my interpretation of his reaction, his smile was potentially meant to admit that his claim might go too far. The article was intended to appeal to progressive activist readers. Although the article was written with the leftist language of social class, the point is to justify his engagement with concrete practical concerns of working people.

Here is an example of what In-Ho was doing, which is quite similar to Bo-Ram’s political confrontation with the district office over the issue of waste collection fee as we

⁵⁴ In the context of our conversation, “to run naked” seemed to mean “to do anything,” though it may be a bit too obvious even to explain. The reason she used the phrase seemed to be that she wanted to put a strong emphasis on her enthusiasm towards welfare expansion.

⁵⁵ The reference is deliberately omitted to prevent disclosure of his identity.

have noted above. One day in the midst of busy election schedules, In-Ho stopped by a pavilion provisionally set up in front of the district office building where many people had already gathered. A group of veterinarians were providing free immunization and health check services to pets (mostly, dogs and cats) brought by their owners under the auspice of the district office. In-Ho introduced himself to a couple of staff members overseeing the event and sat down with them around a table. He was interested in providing similar services to “living alone” seniors (*dokgeo noin*) in the district. Such seniors are often poor and with various health conditions which restrict their spatial mobility. And, they often raise pets as their only companion. For these reasons, “living alone” seniors are those who need the kind of services provided at the scene most but could not get the services. He wanted to devise a visiting service scheme for them. In order to do it, he needed more information about how much money was needed, which professional organizations can be involved, and so on. The veterinarians around the table did not seem to be enthusiastic about the plan. It was quite understandable in the sense that, if volunteering to sit in a pavilion for a few hours is one thing, wandering around the district for days is quite another. They suggested that veterinarians probably should be paid for their services in order for the plan to be realistic. From the conversation, it was clear that much work remained to be done for such a plan to be realized in the district. Still, however, out of knowledge on “living alone” seniors’ conditions he had learned earlier from a social worker, In-Ho was developing a policy option for the largely invisible segment of the population in the district.

For the reason that their activism is based largely around issues of social weaker segments of the district residents such as the poor, women, and the disabled, the

ideological changes have too much subtlety and ambiguity to pin down in a word or two. Often discussions on ideological changes are subject to political contestations, as In-Ho's article above exemplifies. On the contrary to the ideological changes, the influences of the activist pasts were more visible in other aspects of their activism.

(2) Strong Interpersonal Relationship among Activists

The activists I shadowed mostly operated as a small group of close and dedicated activists. The groups were basic units which were ready to be a part of a bigger temporary issue-specific coalition whenever a suitable issue requiring coordinated actions came up. The activists seemed to forge close relationships among themselves. For instance, recall In-Ho's statement that his long tenure in a local party members council was due to the lack of opportunity to get a national level position. If uttered by a stranger, the remark would be perceived as an insult. In the Basecamp, I was first surprised to observe that this kind of remark was directed at each other on many occasions. When I was introduced to members of either the Basecamp or of the local NPP as a researcher observing In-Ho, the members' typical response was "you chose the wrong person," meaning that In-Ho was not an exemplary activist worthy of my time. They would say this in front of In-Ho. It seems strange to say that they showed off their solidarity by exchanging insults to each other. In-Ho was the main target of such insult exchanging practices and my impression was that the closer an individual was to In-Ho, the more he/she did it. It might be peculiar to In-Ho's leadership in the Port district.

In the other districts, I could still observe that the activists were personally close to each other. For example, one day in the Forest district, I was accompanying Bo-Ram

and a staff member of her team. They started to talk about a woman for whom the staff member had been developing romantic feelings. Bo-Ram complained about the woman's ambiguous attitude towards the staff member. The woman often called the staff member to invite him to parties, which appeared to be a sign that the woman wanted to keep him close to her. However, the women had never explicitly accepted or rejected his romantic feelings about her. What is significant in the context of our discussion here is that Bo-Ram talked about it with a tone as if it were her own brother's affair. Then we started a consultation with the staff member, which revealed that the staff had started going on a blind-date out of frustration. This kind of sharing of personal concerns was not limited to the Forest district. In the Solidarity, members often teased Moon-Su by asking whether he was dating anybody. His response was usually, "You should introduce me someone rather than keep asking such a question!" Similarly, a staff of the Solidarity told the others in the office that she had bought a new exercise machine.

Sharing personal information occurred perhaps because the activists spent all day together in a small office space. Mostly, they had lunch together as a group, eating snacks together between meals and helping on each other's tasks sitting at a table together. It seemed that a certain amount of intimate interactions was inevitable. In addition, work during the day was often followed by drinking at the night. It was not uncommon to see the activists suffering from hangovers due to the previous night's drinks during my fieldwork. When important meetings were set up in the evening, the meetings usually continued into overtime (*duitpuri*) in close-by bars or restaurants. One day, after a members meeting to discuss the organization's potentially moving into another building, In-Ho bothered to explain to me why we did not go to the overtime as though going

overtime was what we were supposed to do. This *duitpuri* culture seems to be carried over from the earlier days of activism. Drinking combined with singing and talking was what they enjoyed the most, building secure relationships among themselves.

These close relationships seem to often be extended to the larger local communities where they operated. I often observed that Bo-Ram promised to have drinks with local people whenever she received a phone-call. It does not seem that they were working just in impersonal social relationships which are supposed to characterize modernity in the ideal typical sense. In his doctoral dissertation, Lee Soo-Chul (2009: 144-145, and a personal discussion on his work) argues that, in the case of Seongnam, a city just south of Seoul, certain informal and interpersonal relationships were instrumental to community activism. For example, local activists started to be recognized as partners in dialogues on local matters as they increased their rank in the hierarchy of high school alumni's associations simply because the activists were getting older. However, my fieldwork experiences suggest that such expansions of interpersonal relationships to the larger community were limited. The community activists were relatively "new kids on the block" in the local politics. The relatively weak positions in the local networks of interpersonal ties partly explain the activists' small minority status, as our examination of local elections in the next chapter shows.

In a way, the close relationships were instrumental in mobilizing material and human resources. It is not always easy to refuse requests from someone close. Just recall how I bought the autobiographical book we have examined in the previous chapter. At the time when the book purchase was requested, I felt that I had to come up with good reasons to refuse to buy rather than him giving me compelling reasons to buy the book. I

did not have enough money with me at the time. It did not matter because I would pay it later anyways, and I did.

(3) Literary Aptitude

Another influence of the past activism I observed was the intellectual tendencies of the activists. As we have briefly looked at in the introduction, the events both in the Basecamp and the Solidarity were filled with a lot of educational programs. It seems that the activists were fond of learning and sharing opinions with one another. As we have seen in the beginning of the previous chapter, the members of the Solidarity were not afraid of using trendy abstract vocabularies such as neo-liberalism. It can be said that using abstract language is something everyone does all the time. Usually, however, it takes an extensive period of time to be competent in such practices. Let us recall the fact that, even though the activists had experienced repression as teenagers in the 1980s, the experiences could be reconstructed as such only retrospectively after they got used to abstract ideas like “repression” and “public authority.” Using abstract language was what they were trained for in the early days of their activism, and at that time, radical discourses were available to them as suitable training materials. In addition, as In-Ho’s conception of animal health care for low-income “living alone” seniors shows, the activists actively engaged public institutions thanks to their aptitude in using complex legal and administrative language.

Based on this literary aptitude, the activists were quick to adapt to new abstract discourses such as gender, sexual orientation, environment, immigrant workers and so on, all of which are issues of so-called new social movements (Sohn, Hochul 2011: 92-93).

Often the activists adopted new discourses to express their activism. For example, the Solidarity and the Basecamp strongly opposed to the government river revamping plan on the grounds of potential environmental disasters and wasting public money. Especially, the activists of the Basecamp combined an old student movement repertoire of “rural area actions” (*nonghwal*: college students’ annual trip(s) to rural communities to help farmers’ works) with a relatively new repertoire of non-violent direct action, as we examine in some detail in Chapter V. As new ideas flew in, progressive community activism increasingly became a field where various strands of discourses and activism are intertwined, rather than a monolithic entity.

4. Coda

In this chapter, we have discussed the reasons why labeling community activism as left or progressive in the ways the cross-sectional frameworks presuppose is less than informative. This chapter has suggested that, by examining their life stories, the activists were products of historically specific circumstances. They were born in new urban villages created during the industrial transformations. During the tumultuous 1980s, they, as teenagers, developed a certain kind of moral sense through their experiences including losing someone they admired or respected. As young adults, they came in contact with radical ideologies through activist organizations such as night-school, student associations, and university clubs, all of which were established in the 1980s. Progressive party movements in the late 1990s and early 2000s played significant roles in their continuing activist careers. In short, the right organizations at the right time helped them to be community activists, which they had never planned to be when they first

encountered radical ideologies. Their life trajectories seem to show that the fortuitous turns of events were important to their activist careers, more than what existing literature on activism in the 1980s portrays. Whereas there is some ambiguity in the relationship between radical ideologies of their pasts and their present community activism, the influences of the past experiences of activism were visible in the forms of communal culture of intimate interpersonal relationships and literary aptitude. Especially, literary aptitude is what made them innovators in local politics through their engagements with new ideas and public institutions.

CHAPTER IV
POLITICAL RITUAL CALLED ELECTION:
LIBERAL DEMOCRACY SEEN FROM THE GROUND

In the previous chapters, we have caricatured the industrializing and “neo-liberalizing” South Korea, and started to explore community activists who are usually labeled as “left” or “progressive.” Both past and recent socio-economic developments in South Korea are more multi-dimensional than what “single-logic” accounts of modernity tell us. Especially, due to the complexity, changes in social structures often dubbed as modernization or industrialization allow more than one “true” interpretation or one “right” course of social actions. We have called this structural characteristic “multiple-layeredness,” and have seen that the possibility of politics have much to do with this “multiple-layered” nature. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the community activists have a historicity of their own. Their past activism was based on typical “single-logic” ideologies which presumed the existence of one “true” interpretation and one “right” course of action. In a sense, activists in the 1980s were self-styled “true” representatives of the working people under political repression which effectively hindered democratic representation. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the activists I shadowed were bestowed with such points of view (“I was just happy for the fact that we were going to have a political party representing *minjung*”). The state of affairs became more complicated as democracy deepened with accompanying discursive changes. Whereas the activists were previously perceived on the side of oppressed people in their past radical ideologies, they have suddenly been re-conceptualized as members of

“civil society” where people with various interests cooperate and collide with one another in the new discursive modes (e.g. Choi 1993: 413; Kim, Ho-Gi 1995: 328-330). We discuss some of the implications of this change in the next chapter.

As a preparation for the discussion, this chapter explores some characteristics of election, focusing on campaign repertoires on the ground. In the next section, we briefly examine existing views on democratic transition and its manifestations in South Korea. Overall, it seems to be viewed that the democratic transition as an “institutionalization of uncertainty” in political outcomes has not led to rational political developments of “civil society” in South Korea. The following section, by examining campaign practices on the ground, reflects on the question of why the theoretically supposed relationship between democratic transition and rational growth of “civil society” has not been realized in South Korea. My observations on campaign repertoires on the ground suggest that the repertoires were not particularly suitable for reasoned discursive competition among political forces. Rather, elections can be conceptualized as a ritual in which candidates attempt to incarnate people’s will through intersubjective interactions. The third section attempts to show the importance of social ties in the election processes, progressive candidate unification as a way in which the progressives tried to cope with their weakness in social ties, and the interactive nature of elections expressed in the election results for progressive candidates. In so doing, this chapter calls for an alternative theorization of elections under liberal democracy which does not presuppose “rational” individual actors as the theoretical basis.

1. “Institutionalized Uncertainty”: Existing Views on Democratic Transition and Election

Free and fair elections are such an indispensable political institution in any discussion of democracy and so is it considered in South Korea. The conspicuous absence of it is one of the reasons why most of us scoff at the official name of the other (North) Korea: Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Democracy must mean something else to North Koreans. Whatever North Koreans mean by democracy, however, let the official name of North Korea remind us that we also deal with a historically peculiar kind of democracy (“liberal” democracy) although it should be admitted that liberal democracy has already acquired an arguably universal quality under the global domination of the US and the spread of American-style democracy. At an ideological level of liberal democracy, elections are important because they are an essential mechanism through which people’s sovereign power is delegated to executive and legislative (and often judicial though not in South Korea) office holders. Only a free and fair election can ensure the undistorted representation of the people’s will. At a more practical level, however, one of the important reasons why so many people’s attentions are attracted to elections is that an election is one of the rare vehicles of changes to existing political compositions of public institutions. Many scholars of democratic transition argue that democracy can be characterized by competitions among political forces without any predetermined results (Przeworski 1986: 116; 1988: 63; Lim 1990: 165; Kim, Ho-Gi 1995: 311). Free and fair elections are crucial in a democracy precisely because it “institutionalizes the uncertainty” so that a governing body as the outcome of an election can be legitimized only by the voters’ will which was not predetermined by anyone else before the election. Why is,

however, the possibility of change more important than, say, political stability in the period of democratic transition? That is probably because of an assumption that some changes are needed. If we are allowed to read between the lines, there seems to be a tacit assumption that old authoritarian power holders must be displaced if democracy is to take roots.

When it comes to compositional changes in political institutions, it seems that South Korean democracy has already successfully “institutionalized uncertainty” in which no major parties can control the electoral outcomes. In fact, the last four elections since 2004 (excluding the presidential election in 2007) showed sea changes at every turn. In 2004, then-small minority Open Our Party (*Yeolin Uri Dang*, a former DP-lineage party under Roh Moo Hyun presidency; OOP) gained 32 seats in the National Assembly (the national level law-making body; NA) out of 48 in Seoul, losing only 16 to the Grand National Party (GNP). The outcomes in Seoul helped the OOP to become the majority in the NA. Just four years later however, the GNP took 40 seats, making them the majority. A comparison between the 4th and 5th municipal elections showed a similar drastic political change only in reverse. In 2006, GNP swept 25 district heads in Seoul but got only four elected district heads, having to yield 21 to the United Democratic Party (*Minjutonghapdang*; DP) in 2010. The change in the party composition of the Seoul city council was equally drastic between 2006 and 2010. In 2006, the GNP won 102 seats, leaving only four proportional representative seats to other parties. In 2010, however, the DP became the majority by winning 79 seats while the GNP retained only 27 seats by losing 75 to the DP.

This successful “institutionalization of uncertainty,” however, has not convinced scholars on South Korean local politics that these election results will bring about any substantial rationality in local governing. By comparing “major” candidates (winners and runner-ups) in the 2002, 2006, and 2010 local elections, Park and Han (2011) show that the “major” candidates tend to have more educational attainment and are wealthier as time goes on. In Seoul and its vicinity, elections have been routinized as competition between two major parties. By combining these two facts, it is argued that political elites in local politics are recruited increasingly among wealthier people with higher educational attainment through two major parties especially in the Seoul area. Heu, Chul-Hang (2011: 247) argues for putting some restrictions on party interventions such as party nomination in local elections because, when political parties function as gate-keepers, voluntary political participation from “civil society” tend to be dampened. In his view, since party nominees are largely decided by their party loyalty and financial contribution, “really” able politicians tend to be winnowed out through party politics and nomination processes (Heu 2011: 238). After reviewing the electoral precinct redistricting process of Gyeonggi Province in 2006, Yoon, Jong-Bin (2006: 320-323) points out that two major parties blocked routes to be local politicians other than theirs by creating electoral districts in ways advantageous only to them. For example, minor party or independent candidates have a better chance to be elected in 4 person electing precincts. During the 2006 electoral precinct redistricting process, the two major parties effectively reduced minor party or independent candidates’ chances by dividing 4 person electing precincts into smaller 2 person electing precincts. As Jeong, Sang-Ho (2011) shows, an important consequence of the two-party domination over local political institutions is intensification

of partisan bickering between the two major parties in local politics. In the existing literature, South Korean democracy looks to be failing to base local governing on the rational development of “civil society.” After over two decades of one after another relatively free and fair election, why is it the case if it is indeed so?

A simpler answer is that power structures and practices rooted in the authoritarian past have not been changed enough. Most scholars on the South Korean democratic transition would agree that, from the beginning, the political transition to democracy in South Korea was “limited” or failed to “completely” cleanse up authoritarian legacies (Im 1990; Kim, Ho-Gi 1995; Seong 1995; Sonn 2011: 61). Before the 2012 National Assembly election, a senior journalist from a center-to-left newspaper strongly urged the two opposition parties to forge an alliance against the conservative ruling party. This article reflects the widely shared scholarly views of the “incomplete” nature of the South Korean democratic transition.

The Democratic Party and the United Progressive Party are different parties from their roots. Any Party seeking power should nominate candidates in all the electoral districts and ask for voters’ judgments. However, they are up against the Saenuri Party⁵⁶ (formerly, Grand National Party). As in animated movies, each unit should be transformed into a part of a bigger robot to fight monsters. Saenuri Party is the reason for an opposition alliance.

The Saenuri Party originated from the Democratic Justice Party founded by Chun Doo Hwan and the new junta force in 1980. In the 1990 tri-party merger, Kim Young Sam’s “reformist conservative” force with the regional base of Pusan and Kyeongnam and Kim Jong Pil’s “remainder of the old junta” with a Chungcheong regionalist tendency joined the party. This point marked the birth of a power cartel of power elites-conservatives-Yeongnam regionalism. This is an obvious rollback of History. Later, the “old junta” went their own way. In the processes of the 1996 and 1997 elections, ... professionals and some of the pro-democracy leaders joined them. The range of political forces within it was expanded.

⁵⁶ The GNP changed the name to Saenuri Party in February 2012 due to its unpopularity. Although “Saenuri” can be roughly translated to “New World” in English, for some reason, they decided “Saenuri” to be the official English name.

In this way, Saenuri Party has grown into a monster which is an amalgam of powerful elites such as pro-Japanese, pro-American sycophants of foreign forces, military coup forces, and monopoly capitalists of *chaebol*. It is not coincidental that the party is led by a daughter of Park Chung Hee, who ruled with an iron fist for 18 years after the 1961 coup.

The victories of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun over this powerful opponent were akin to miracles. It would be also nearly miraculous if opposition parties win on December 19th this year. ... Failing to form an opposition alliance is committing a crime to History. (*The HanKyoreh* Feb. 29, 2012. internet edition, my translation)

The excerpt cited above suggests a graphic and vastly simplified picture of South Korean politics. It is graphic to the extent that the ruling party is described as a monster. It is vastly simplified to the degree that the politics is compared to animated films. The fact that the “remainder of the old junta” helped Kim Dae Jung to be elected as President in 1997 is just one of the many omissions devised to justify this simple depiction. Although we are not certain about how representative the article was, we can certainly savor the state of public opinions of that time from the fact that a respectable newspaper could run such a colorful article. In the article, forming the opposition alliance is justified as the call of History. The call of History is proclaimed to be “miraculously” dislodging the “monster” from power. While it reminds us that South Koreans have already beat the odds twice before, according to this article, this time it would be possible only through an alliance of the opposition parties. The author, however, does not explain why his claim is the mandate of History. It is largely assumed to be shared by the readers. We explore this issue more deeply in the next chapter. For now, let us suppose with what appears in the article such as regionalism, pro-Japanese, pro-American, foreign forces, military coup, monopoly capitalists, *chaebol*, Park Chung Hee, Chun Doo Hwan and so on. All these words represent something bad in the context. If they are keywords of a political tenet, the closest political tenet we can find in the South Korean context is *minjung* nationalism

which has been briefly explained in the introduction. From the article alone, it is not certain that the author is a *minjung* nationalist of some sort. What is relatively clear is whom the author is appealing to: those who have been influenced by historical consciousness of *minjung* nationalism. After over two decades of liberal democratic experiment, is South Korea still fighting against authoritarianism of the 1980s? In other words, is the authoritarian power structure still intact after all these years? It seems so, according to the journalist.

2. Election as a Ritual: an Alternative Theorization

In this section, we try to reflect on the question above in a slightly different angle by looking at where local politics and community activism intersected on the occasion of the 2010 local elections: Are elections a mere instrument to rational developments of politics? If there are more in elections, what are the “extras” and how do we understand them?

In the introduction to his book *the Urban Experience*, David Harvey (1989: 1-3) starts with citing Michel de Certeau’s recount of climbing up the World Trade Center during his visit in New York City. In Harvey’s interpretation, a “God-like” overview of a city is likened to an interpretative framework of life on the street and he goes on to explain why he chose a “meta-theory” of Marxism as his framework. Although the importance of theoretical frameworks cannot be easily overemphasized, in this chapter, we approach liberal democracy from a “street-view” in accordance with the spirit of the previous chapters. It is not because, somehow, “street-views” can provide us with a truer picture. Nor is it because there are some compelling reasons why we should put a theoretical priority to “micro-politics” with some local implications over “macro-politics”

with national implications or *vice versa*. Rather, it is because “street-views” can be useful complements to “Birdseye-views.” In fact, there is no shortage of “Birdseye-views,” a few samples of which we have just tasted above. To what extent do campaign practices on the ground meet the theoretical expectations of liberal democracy? If they do not as some of the existing works suggest, what are the sources of the “failure”?

(1) South Korean Administrative Structure and the 2010 Local Elections in Seoul

Some rudimentary knowledge of the South Korean local governing system would help us better understand some of the specifics of local elections. Besides the capital city of Seoul, South Korea has six metropolitan cities and 9 provinces which are nominally equivalent to Seoul in the administrative hierarchy. Elected mayors (*sijang*) and governors (*dojisa*) are respectively the administrative heads of metropolitan cities and provinces and each has its own council of elected members. It is nominal because there are significant variations in their populations and economic sizes. Roughly half of the South Korean population lives either in Seoul or in Gyeonggi Province.⁵⁷ Each metropolitan city has several districts (and sometimes counties when previously rural areas were annexed). Several cities (urban areas) and counties (rural areas) comprise each province. So, metropolitan districts, (non-metropolitan) cities, and counties are nominally equivalent and the basic self-governing units. District heads, mayors, and county heads are all elected positions along with equivalent council members. Under this basic unit, there are several levels of administrative sub-units, names of which vary depending on the upper unit (urban *dong*, and rural *eup*, *myeon*, *ri*, basic meaning of which is village or

⁵⁷ Historically speaking, Gyeonggi means the vicinity of Seoul.

town.). In urban areas, *dong* is the lowest administrative unit paid by government and further divided into *tong* and *ban*. Heads of *tong* and *ban* are titular positions invited into governing by local government. Although they are honorary positions, under the authoritarian governments in the past, they functioned as conduits through which state power was mediated and local people were mobilized. They are still important mediators of some of the district policy information. We do not discuss about them very much not because their influences on local politics are negligible but because they were not often seen during my fieldwork due to some social and political distances between them and the community activists.

The 2010 Municipal Elections

In the 2010 local elections, voters were asked to vote for 8 different sets of candidates: in the case of Seoul, candidates for mayor, district head, directly and proportionally electing city council member, directly and proportionally electing district council member, city educational superintendent, and city educational council member were on the ballot. For one mayor, 25 district heads, 96 directly electing city council members, one educational superintendent and 8 educational council members, a candidate who gets the largest number of votes is elected for each corresponding electoral district. For proportional representatives, each political party nominates a list of candidates with a predetermined order before the election. Seats are distributed to the parties submitting the lists according to their shares in the votes within the predetermined number of seats. Ten city council members are elected as proportional representatives. For directly electing district council members, electoral precincts are the same as city council members but 2 to 4 individuals

are elected according to the number of eligible voters. Electoral districts electing 4 can be divided into two districts electing 2 each. All of such districts have been divided largely because the division is advantageous to the two major parties of the GNP and DP that are practically able to make the decision. For our 3 administrative districts (Forest, Mountain, and Port), some numbers of individuals between 10 and 20 are directly elected and 2-3 individuals are proportionally elected for each district. In ballots, political parties are ordered according to their numbers of seats in the NA and given a number by the order. Thus, any candidate nominated by the GNP uses number 1, one from the DP uses number 2 and so on. Parties without a NA seat are given numbers prior to independent candidates according to the alphabetical order of Korean letters of the official party names. In a sense, they can guess which number they would be given although not certain enough to spend money in printing the numbers ahead of the time. Non-affiliated candidates should wait until the entire candidacy registration is finalized to be given a number. Numbers for independent candidates are distributed through lottery. Party interventions are prohibited for the educational elections although candidates implicitly claimed their affinity to certain parties during the campaigns.⁵⁸

Each set of 8 elections had 2 to 9 (usually 4-5) candidates in the 3 districts. Because of the large numbers, it would take anyone quite a while of close study to remember the candidates' names and party affiliations sorted by each set of 8 elections not to mention their policy orientations. The situation was made worse by the fact that, with the exceptions of the mayoral election and perhaps district head elections, voters were not familiar with most of the candidates before the elections. This difficulty makes

⁵⁸ Those who are given number 1 and 2 were considered to be advantageous due to the numbers' associative effects with two major parties.

the elections basically “wars of recognition.” Due to this nature of election, candidates from the two major parties that are frequently exposed to the public through national media, regardless of whether in good or bad ways, have significant built-in advantages. In order to be recognized, let alone taken seriously, independent candidates and those from smaller parties need to start their campaigns earlier than those from the major parties. The “preliminary candidacy” registration can accommodate their needs in a limited way.⁵⁹ As a “preliminary” candidate, one can start meeting voters on the streets, distributing business cards along the way and wearing a sash-like “shoulder strip” (*eoketi*) which usually hangs on the left shoulder tailing to the right side. However, they should wait, for the full-fledged campaigns, until the beginning of official campaign period of 13 days. By full-fledged campaign, I mean mobilizing all the equipment and repertoires allowed by the rules. The equipment includes a vehicle decorated with the candidate’s name, given number and a symbolic color, an amplifier and street placards informing voters with main campaign slogans along with the name, number, and color. The repertoires include playing campaign songs, making street speeches, and conversation sessions of small scales in private spaces hosted by those other than the candidate or staffs. The sizes of equipment and the repertoires are regulated by the rules according to the level of the elections. The regulation has some room for interpretation and some of the ambiguity is actively exploited largely by candidates. For example, district council member candidates should use a voice amplifier within a size and weight that “one person can carry.” What is usually selected is the biggest kind portable by an imaginary person. I rarely observed

⁵⁹ Registration is accepted 90 days prior to the Election Day. It is 240 days for Presidential election, 120 days for NA member, metropolitan mayor, and provincial governor elections, and 60 days for rural area (i.e. county head and county council member) elections.

anyone actually carrying an amplifier with him/her or disputing the legality of opponents' equipment. For another example, in the "preliminary" campaign period, a designated staff can help the candidate distribute business cards "within a very close distance." One might assume that "a very close distance" means walking side by side. Sometimes, however, they parted a little more than that. The staff was standing on one corner of backstreet crossroads while the candidate was standing on the opposite corner. I never observed the practice being disputed.

(2) "Packaged Deals": Commercial Implications of Election

Perhaps, the ambiguity of the regulation is not an immediate source of dispute because election practices are not something cooked up overnight. Like many cultural practices, campaign practices on the ground have continued, certainly with some modifications, year after year while the actual origins of the practices have been forgotten who-knows-when. Certainly, these practices have been transmitted through politicians and political parties.

When very similar, if not identical, practices are conducted across party lines, however, we may suspect that other factors have sustained the practices, too. In my observation, the most significant one of such factors is the existence of people who (or try to) make a profit during elections. The presence of printing industry was most conspicuous. The printing industry consists of event-planning (and consulting) firms, advertising firms, and printing shops, existing largely in a form of a cottage industry. They make business cards to be handed to voters on the streets, leaflets to be sent to voters' homes and other equipment such as sash-like "shoulder strips" (*eoketi*), posters,

placards, banners of various sizes and decorating materials on vehicles. They have the material and mental capacity to be mobilized in election campaigns not only because they normally make business cards, pamphlets, signboards for local shops but also because they have experienced elections over the years. A result of these accumulated experiences is that their products are more or less standardized. For example, business cards have similar formats regardless of the party affiliation of candidates. They usually contain the given number, name (with a brief description, for example “100% Local Person”), picture (mostly with a friendly smile, the unnatural kind one can see only when taking pictures), party affiliation, kind of office, electoral district and the main slogan of the candidates in the front, and some more campaign platforms, a brief resume, and contact information in the back. It takes skill and experience to cram this information artfully and efficiently onto a business card. If it has been done before, why should one not follow the precedents?

Since business cards are but one small bit of the commercial products used in elections, consulting firms often offer packaged products. In early April, I visited one such firm following In-Ho who was seeking consultation at the time. The firm occupied a normal residential house, with a couple of bedrooms converted into office space where a couple of workers were working at the time of our visit. It seemed that In-Ho was introduced to the firm through one of his personal ties and had an appointment with the manager of the firm. They began their conversation by introducing themselves to each other, exchanging their business cards. I was introduced by In-Ho to the manager as a party member⁶⁰ and I was given her business card, too. The manager was a woman

⁶⁰ Although I was and still am not a party member, I was often introduced as such by In-Ho so that he did not have to explain further about my presence when what I was doing was not important in the conversation at hand.

apparently in her forties wearing a business suit. She boasted that the firm was currently managing four “projects.” And, she added that the parties of the candidates were ranging from the GNP to the DP to the New Progressive Party (*Jinbosindang*; NPP). It seemed that, at least in her mind, candidacy for elections was commoditized enough to be called “project.” She gave us a part of the contract document of a “project” so that we could estimate the cost of using the firm. The list was comprehensive to the extent that, I felt, anyone could be a candidate if he/she had enough money and desire. In-Ho was not interested in any of the packaged deals. Instead, In-Ho inquired into the possibility of conducting opinion polls which he would need in the coming weeks. She knew, in her personal connections, someone who could provide such services at lower than market prices. Upon our leaving, she urged us to seriously consider buying a package. She told us that a discounted price could be offered when the contract became more tangible. “Because I am well aware that our side doesn’t have much money,” she added. It seemed that “our side” meant progressive parties. Maybe, she was an activist before. After all, the firm was introduced to In-Ho through his connections.

After visiting the firm, I became aware of the existence of commercial catalogues scattered here and there on the desks in the campaign headquarters of the candidates I shadowed. Despite the necessarily provisional nature of the campaign headquarters, merchants seemed to know where they were and commercial catalogues kept coming in. Consulting firms sent campaign calendars which suggested what campaign repertoires would be used and when, along with various legally set deadlines. A law-firm sent an invitation to its legal and campaign strategy training sessions for candidates and staffs. Innovative entrepreneurs tried to exploit the opportunity, too. A manufacturer sent a

catalogue advertising human-shaped robots which could be made resemble the candidate. It seemed that the robots were capable of waving hands and bowing. Imagining the robots put in use made me feel creepy. When I actually observed the robots on the street, however, they looked funny, rather than creepy, enough to attract some of the voters' attentions. A civic-minded enterprise (or social enterprise in the trendy term; *sahoejeok gi-eop* in Korean) offered small electricity-powered vehicles resembling larger-sized tricycles. The vehicle seemed to offer a cheaper and environment-friendly solution because it does not create immediate emission. In practice, it attracted voters' attentions simply because it had not been seen before. An innovation that stood out the most to me in terms of practicality was LED-lit shoulder strips. The innovated strip puts a number of LED bulbs where the candidate's name and given number are so that voters could see the name and given number during the night campaigns. LED bulbs are light in weight and do not consume much electricity so that batteries can be light, too. At the same time, the bulbs are not blindingly bright, either. It seems that the shoulder strip is an example of how market economy and election can benefit from each other although it may be too trivial to be noticed.

The commercial implication of elections does not end there. Musicians, singers, and recording studios are mobilized to make campaign songs. Many candidates used children's and traditional folk songs because they are widely known as well as free of copy right obligations. Some who could afford used copy-righted popular songs, too. Polling companies were making money in exchange of giving candidates a sense of who was winning. Truck drivers who normally engage in delivery business were making extra money by lending their trucks as campaign vehicles as well as by driving them. Elections

were providing opportunities for building owners to temporarily fill empty office spaces in their buildings with campaign headquarters. For some people, the elections were employment opportunities to work as paid campaign staffs. With more crowded streets, more money spent, variously colored banners hung and more songs played than the usual, the ground almost seemed to be filled with an atmosphere of festivity.

In this way, the material limits of what candidates can do is largely mediated through what markets can provide because commerce is one of the few innovating forces entangled with election. By contrast, election laws and rules are by nature more interested in what one cannot do. The robot catalogue proudly indicated that the robots were “Election Commission approved.” That is one of the reasons why candidates from various parties conduct largely standardized campaigns as though religious believers faithfully follow their rituals, believing that doing so would help their wishes fulfilled.

In the sense that the first thing the historical Jesus reportedly did when he arrived at the Temple in Jerusalem was expelling merchants from the holy place, it seemed, the community activists I shadowed were no Jesus or had stopped playing Jesus at some point. It did not seem like they spent as much money as candidates from the major parties did because they were constantly trying to save money whenever possible.⁶¹ It was clear, however, that they did have to spend money to do what others did and that they found what others were doing was necessary.

⁶¹ We will not discuss the financial aspects of election deeply in this work not because they are not important but because I did not have a chance to look at detailed accounting information of any candidates I shadowed. My impression was that the progressives I observed ran their campaigns largely on debt. A semi-public campaign financial system, in which most election costs are reimbursed when getting 15 percent or more votes, seemed to help them avoid the possibility of being heavily indebted after the elections. However, it was quite ironic that the progressives were helped by an easy availability of credit as we have examined in Chapter II.

(3) Campaign Repertoires on the Ground

When I joined the election campaigns in early April of 2010, the community activists had already been preparing for elections for a few months or so although Election Day (June 2) was almost two months away. Bo-Ram had already acquired the “preliminary” candidate status and a campaign office. And she had been meeting with people on the streets for a few months. As an incumbent district council member, she was allowed to distribute pamphlets called “council activity report” (*euijeong bogoseo*) to homes in her electoral district prior to the election. She could not afford to lose such an incumbent’s advantage, however small it might be, although it meant spending more money.

In-Ho’s local NPP council had already decided to nominate two district council member candidates and been trying to form a unified front with other activist organizations, the DLP and the Citizens Participation Party (*Gugminchamyeodang*; CPP)⁶² in the district. Two candidates already had “preliminary” candidate status and had started to meet with voters on the street. Since the candidates ran for the office in different electoral districts, In-Ho rented two offices and was shuffling back and forth between them. He was managing two races largely based on his experience of running for NA member a couple of times in the past.

Meanwhile, Moon-Su was working as the chief of staff for one of the heads of the Solidarity in a city council member election campaign. Although the Solidarity was not a partisan organization, people in the organization did not take the elections any less seriously. The Solidarity together with other activist organizations and progressive parties

⁶² The CPP is a liberal reformist minor party which had a political affinity with the DP. The party later joined with the DLP and some members of the NPP to form the United Progressive Party (*Tonghapjinbodang*; UPP) just before the 2012 NA member election.

in the district had formed an umbrella organization (Mountain District Voters Coalition) for the elections and had tried to select unified progressive candidates through semi-open primaries. The head of the Solidarity had been determined to be a city council member candidate by the Voters Coalition.

Campaign Headquarters

All the candidates I shadowed had already rented an office when I arrived at the field. A building with a campaign office was readily distinguishable from one without a campaign office because a huge banner would cover the building. A building near high traffic and visible to passers-by was considered to have a good location. Most of the candidates were content with the locations of their offices. Overall, however, candidates from two major parties tended to have slightly better locations. The slight difference may be compared to one between Broadway theaters and Off-Broadway in New York City.

As noted above, In-Ho rented two offices. One of In-Ho's candidates in the Port district had an office in a building which was half-covered by a flyover road down the hill while one of the competitors from the DP had the office in a building on top of the hill, clearly visible from the street. In-ho's other office was located in a backstreet while a lot of the major party candidates had offices right in front of subway entrances besides a boulevard. Although the city council candidate in the Mountain district and Bo-Ram had offices besides boulevards, they were located some 50 yards away from crossroads while many of their competitors were occupying ones right in front of crossroads. These differences were largely due to the affordability of the spaces and the disparity was just one of the many which made the playing field biased towards major party candidates.

Due to the provisional nature of campaign offices, the inside structures of the previous uses often had not been cleared away. The city council candidate's office looked like a private medical practitioner's simply because it had been so. The district council candidates in the Port district rented offices which had been a PC room⁶³ and a storage space respectively. The offices were filled with provisionally borrowed desks and chairs, hastily connected cheap telephones, and computers with internet connections. Political slogans, posters of the candidates, large-print schedulers, and maps of the electoral districts on the walls managed to remind me that I was in election campaign offices.

Spatial Aspect of Election

Among items posted on the walls, maps seemed to reveal an interesting aspect of election campaign. Besides public institutions with well-defined physical jurisdictions such as police stations, people rarely put maps on the walls of their business spaces. A couple of notable exceptions are realtors and restaurant owners who deliver. Putting maps on the walls seems to imply that at least part of their transactions occurs in a larger space than the very sites of their business operation. By that same token, the fact that maps were put on the walls seems to indicate that the candidates and campaign staffers were aware that at least part of their political endeavors was to be materialized outside of the campaign headquarters. The spatial awareness, however, was rarely expressed in their exhibition of interests in the maps that they themselves put there. Usually, I was the only person who

⁶³ "PC room" (*pisibang*) is a retail space which is equipped with computers with high-speed internet connections. Customers are usually charged on an hourly basis. Because those who play on-line games are the main target, it is often called "game room" (*geimbang*). The campaign office which had previously been a PC room was often visited by elementary school kids who did not know the shop had been closed. Except for the staff, they were almost the only kind of people who bothered to come down to the faintly lit below-ground level office.

studied the maps for any length of time. They consulted the maps only when they bothered to show me where we were heading. The apparent aloofness towards the maps, in my view, does not necessarily indicate their negligence of the spatial dimension of local politics. Rather, it was the map itself that was not interesting enough to attract their attentions. Unlike realtors and restaurant owners who use maps specialized for their purposes, they used a generic map with bold marker lines manually added to indicate the exact range of their electoral precincts. Generic maps are not very useful beyond getting a general sense of landscape and finding a route from one point to another. Simply, their local knowledge far exceeded what the generic maps could possibly show. One morning during the election period, the city council candidate in the Mountain district showed me where we were heading on the map. As soon as we departed from the office, I felt helpless since I did not know which bus line to take and where to transfer. The only thing I could do was to follow his directions. Meanwhile, In-Ho and Bo-Ram would take me in their cars. Traveling in a car did not help me, either. The general sense of where I was would rapidly evaporate from my mind soon after a few turns, overwhelmed by the specificity of overflowing local scenes. Naturally, it was seldom possible for me to reconstruct our paths on maps after traveling by car. It was only when I walked, meaning I had enough time to digest specifics of local scenes, that I could do it. For me, the abstractness of map was not always translatable to the specificity of local scenes.

However, knowing the localities better than me does not necessarily mean that they had comprehensive geographic knowledge of their localities. Even for them, at least some parts of the space still remained to be experienced, understood and acted upon. On the first day I visited Bo-Ram, we went out to the streets to distribute her business cards.

After going through a maze of back allies, she seemed to be confused about whether we were still inside her electoral district. Her guess was that we were on one of the borders. She asked a shop keeper about it and the keeper who happened to be pretty knowledgeable about the electoral district demarcation there confirmed her guess was right. “You don’t need to campaign here because most of the passers-by here don’t belong to yours,” the keeper added. While walking along the border line road, however, she did not take any chances. She still distributed her business cards, shook hands with pedestrians, and visited nearby shops along the way to have a short conversation with whomever was in there. Indeed, some of them declared that they did not live within her electoral district while others just took her business cards and hastened their way. The moments of similar learning experiences occurred to other candidates, too. One of In-Ho’s district council candidate in the Port district expected that there would be quite a few people in the banks of the creek which crosses the district. Because public money had been directed to build physical exercise facilities and trail paths on the banks, the place was supposed to function as such for the people living around the area. At least logically, her plan was reasonable enough to spend her precious campaign time going there. In actuality, however, she found that not many people were using the facility at least during that time of day and had to move into nearby apartment complexes to make up for her “loss” of time. Thinking that she would meet young voters, one group of her target voters, the other NPP candidate in the district went out to a busy commercial district only to find out that the young people using the place were largely from other electoral districts than her own. The city council candidate in the Mountain district went to an apartment complex one day. At first, we stood at one of the gates of the complex

and he explained to me that he would not greet people who were just passing by the gate because those people were probably from other electoral districts going to nearby hills for a walk. Instead, he tried to meet only with people coming in and out of the complex. There were not many people coming and going, however. We had to venture inside of the complex to meet more people. It was the unusually cold weather that he cited to explain to me why there were not as many people as he expected to meet. “If it were warmer, a lot more people would be strolling around here,” he said. Due to these limits of their geographic knowledge, they seemed to prefer going to pre-proven places by previous experiences such as routes leading to subway entrances, large apartment complexes or gates of religious facilities on Sundays, instead of venturing into unknown places.

Campaign Platforms

In liberal political theories, these geographical aspects of electoral campaign are rarely significant. After all, for the liberal theories, competition among various political orientations or policy options is thought to be what an election is all about. And, the community activists would entirely agree that it should be. They seriously believed in responsible politics based on reasonable election platforms and made their platforms represent the demands of working people they could imagine. Pamphlets sent to voters’ homes are filled with such claims. The district council candidates in the Port district, in their campaign pamphlets, criticized the district council only with GNP and DP members for their lack of proactive political initiatives and rubber-stamping the district government’s demands.

In the last four years (year ’06-’09), the [Port] district council made just 3 ordinances. They cut one hundred twenty million won of lunch subsidy for low-income household children

last year. What did the [Port] district council do? (From an election pamphlet, the brackets show the district name changed into the pseudonym, my translation)

In a similar vein, Bo-Ram emphasized that, as the only incumbent progressive member, she had been the only dissident in the district council. Her pamphlets showed her lone efforts to resist the district government's expenditure wastes and to reveal corruption in the government. Similarly, the pamphlets of the city council candidate in the Mountain district accentuated his role in a local movement calling for the resignation of the district head who had been accused of selling public offices in his disposal. In the contrast to the corrupt district head, the pamphlets asserted that the candidate is responsible politician who is able to deliver his promises and heed to people's demands.

The kinds of promises they made were mostly to improve the welfare of socially weaker groups, such as women and children. The most common promises in their pamphlets were (1) free school lunch program prepared in environmentally friendly ways (possibly with locally grown food), (2) enhanced protection for women and children against (especially sexual) violence, and (3) improved public schools and increased public daycare facilities. The city council candidate in the Mountain district took on additional bigger issues such as anti-corruption initiatives, youth unemployment and stopping the national government's four major river revamping projects. One candidate in the Port district promised to increase the supply of residential space for one person households while the other vowed to increase public parks and public facilities for seniors. Bo-Ram suggested that voters would get an enhanced public dental care system.

On the surface, they wanted to simply redirect public funds toward the welfare of ordinary working people in tangible and practical ways. On a deeper level, however, they were testing the possibility of representation of the hitherto under-represented in local

political institutions by turning public institutions into a political arena for people's direct political engagement which would facilitate a situation that the institutions respond more sensitively to people's needs. The city council candidate in Mountain district called himself "citizens' candidate" in his pamphlets. Also, in one of his campaign songs, it was claimed that "we, the people" should be the judges for the current government's failures, implying that even the DP could not be trusted. In a similar vein, one of the main campaign slogans of the candidates in the Port district was "our representative versus their own league of conservative politicians."

Although they seemed to maintain the notion of the "true" representation of *minjung* they were bestowed from the past activism, the notion was expressed in their efforts to identify specific needs of under-represented segments of the population without lumping local people into one totalizing category like *minjung*. Even then, this progressive idea of people's direct engagement or transparent (and immediate) representation in politics seems to be still an elusive goal. For example, in the 2010 local elections, most of the DP candidates including those in the Port district suddenly ran their campaigns on free school lunch program which had been advocated by progressives for a decade. One of the DP district council candidates in the Port district put such a promise on the placard outside of his campaign office building: "free of charge" (*muryo*) lunch program. The "free of charge" phrase was an interesting choice of words because a legal term "free of beneficiaries' payment" (*musang*) was more commonly used. The word *muryo* usually means a gift in commercial transactions or a charitable giveaway (of, for instance, free meals for homeless), and does not convey a sense of welfare entitlement. In this sense, the difference between *muryo* and *musang* in campaign slogans can be said to

be one between a generous gift from government and welfare entitlement claimed to be extended by the people. Probably, the word *muryo* was just a haphazard choice for the DP candidate part since most of the other DP candidates used *musang*. But, what is significant here is that campaign slogans did not entail deeper political discussions on the welfare policy. At the level of actual implementation of the policy, there is little difference whether it is carried out under the name of *musang* or *muryo*. And, the *muryo* was good enough for a candidate who bought into the idea of universal free school lunch program. While the deeper engagement in political discussions was an important strength of the progressives, elections largely did not provide with opportunities to accentuate their difference from other political forces.

Campaign Repertoires on the Ground #1: Face-to-face interaction

Largely, the same can be said about other campaign processes. Campaign repertoires on the ground were not suitable for deeper political dialogues which could accentuate the strengths of the progressives, either. One day during the elections, I followed the city council candidate in the Mountain district and his adjunct speakers. When they articulated their critiques of the ruling GNP in their speech, a street vendor interrupted and shouted “All politicians do is throw mud at each other.” I looked at her with surprise. She noticed me and silently returned to her work. She must have thought I was a male staff of the campaign and did not want any trouble for the disruption.

What was she doing? Was it a factual statement or an opinion? Why was it spoken against an independent candidate who had nothing to do with business as usual? How does the statement fit with her apparent social status as a street vendor? Plausible

meanings of her statement cannot be even guessed without understanding the fact that her words seemed to follow a savvy political script for silencing opposition party candidates, specifically designed to exploit public's general distrusts on politicians and party politics. In South Korean political contexts, political cynicism like the street vendor's statement above works against only liberals and progressives. As we examine in the next chapter, the reason is that the conservative GNP have a tenacious supporting base while the liberal DP and the progressive parties depend their electoral fortunes largely on enthusiasm of non-GNP voters. To say bluntly, the best strategy for the GNP is to show that the DP and the progressive parties are not particularly better than the GNP.

To our frustration, we cannot know for sure what the street vendor tried to accomplish at the specific moment. She might have been annoyed by the volume of the amplifier; frustrated by a slow day; supporting another candidate; not interested in the election at all. Even if I had asked her the reason, I doubt that I could have gotten a straight answer largely because of the way I was perceived by her. What is significant here, however, is that the political script she seemed to follow is designed specifically to make a political statement without revealing the speaker's intention.

During the campaign, I observed people with various degrees of willingness to show their intentions. Some people were very friendly to the candidates I shadowed (maybe, to all candidates). Other people expressed a certain degree of animosity towards them. The vast majority of people, however, did not signal anything. When candidates were on the streets, their only purpose was to have eye contact and even physical contact like hand-shakes with voters whenever possible and to get any signs along with the contacts. For this to be achieved effectively, a minimum of 2 aides were required: one for

introducing the candidate; the other for distributing business cards afterwards. Candidates from the two major parties usually had some ten people introduce the candidate and 2-4 staffers give business cards away while the candidate was trying to get some physical contact with potential voters.

With potential voters wanting to hide their minds and candidates desiring to know them, here begins a cat and mouse game. Some people explicitly avoided contact as if they were criminals going around cops. They would walk to the other side if they saw a candidate coming their way, or suddenly start to run a couple of steps before the candidate, or at the very least looked the other way. To maximize contact with these people, the candidate and staff need to develop a well-coordinated dance, especially during morning and evening rush hour. On at least one occasion, I saw campaign staffs rehearsing as choreographed.

In a matter of a second or two, they ambushed a person. Naturally, candidates with more staffs were able to “catch” more by-passers than their financially less fortunate counterparts. Once ambushed, some gave up avoiding and shook hands with the candidate (and even inspected the candidate), while others were still resolved to ignore them. Some people seemed to understand that they had to at least accept the business cards offered once they were “caught.” Some of them even seemed to have developed a specific know-how on how to collect them. One Sunday morning during the campaign in the Forest district, some 7 candidates of various levels of elections and their staffs lined up in front of a Catholic church. As church members were entering the church, the candidates and staffs were trying to make contact and distribute business cards. The main entrance was pretty crowded but, to my surprise, the scene was as orderly as it could be.

Most of the church goers just gave up avoiding the candidates, made physical contact and collected all 7 business cards with ease. It was as if they had rehearsed this the day before. The “caught” people rarely failed to glance at the business cards they collected as though they tried to be decorous even when they seemed to be the most indifferent people to the elections before they were “caught.”

Day time street campaigns seemed to have slightly different ingredients. The candidates could meet with seemingly less busy people in addition to people hurrying by. They were usually older people and/or women, running small shops or sitting on chairs or benches on the sidewalks or in urban parks. Maybe because they were bored or tried to be decorous, they usually paid more attention to candidates approaching them. However, they were no more willing to reveal their minds. Sometimes, they solicited “important” information about candidates such as birth place, parents’ birth places when candidates were young, or family constitution although it did not seem to me that they cared to remember the candidates. If lucky, candidates could get some information about other candidates such as their popularity. And, the lucky days were very rare in my observation. Furthermore, I never observed the candidates explaining their campaign platforms in face-to-face contact situations.

In response, the candidates were developing improvised ways to engage in the limited nature of interactions with voters in the street campaigns. For example, Bo-Ram sometimes changed her accent according to whom she interacted with. Because her parents came from the southwest (*Honam or Jeonra*) and middle region (*Chungcheong*) respectively, she had an ability to mimic the regional accents. Whenever she met with people with these regional origins, she used the relevant regional accents half-jokingly,

citing her parents' birthplaces. On the street, In-Ho repeatedly told the voters that one candidate's first name was the same as a popular singer. In my observation, these strategies were aimed to work as an ice-breaker as well as to make a more lasting impression on voters' minds.

In the meantime, this process of street campaign seemed to be physically as well as emotionally tiring. All the candidates I shadowed had to walk a few miles during day time or had to stand in thought-to-be crowded places for 2-3 hours during mornings and evenings while bowing, shaking hands, talking and the like. In the case of the city council candidate I shadowed, one of his knees gave away during the campaign so that he had to wear a supporting brace. The emotional cost of putting on a smile all the time when counterparts were apparently indifferent or, sometimes, even rude to them, did not seem to be easy, either. It seemed that voters could be significantly ruder when their votes were solicited on phone-calls. One of the district candidates in the Port district would question In-Ho the efficacy of making phone-calls during the day. "Either they don't answer or hang up when I introduce myself," she complained. Voters' rude responses can be understandable when we consider that they were getting all kinds of unsolicited phone-calls either from candidates or polling companies. In the end, however, candidates were the ones asking favors from potential voters. But, still, it must hurt emotionally. Was it not ultimately the voters' welfare that was at stake? It could be regarded unfair, but all that they could do was to adapt to it. Getting a slightest sign of favor such as a wave or smile was what the candidates could enjoy mostly and what kept them going. One afternoon, I followed Moon-Su street-campaigning, holding a small picket which was filled with campaign slogans. We went through the busy allies of a market place, meeting

and greeting with shop-keepers. Along the way, he stopped by a NPP district council candidate's campaign office. The candidate was out campaigning and only a couple of staffs were working in the office. "Recently, the candidate is looking healthier as the campaign goes on. What is the secret?" Moon-Su asked them. "There is no way of getting healthier," one of the staffs replied. "The secret is wearing make-up. At first, he did not like wearing it but now he does it even though nobody asks him to."

Does getting contact and giving business cards worth the emotional and physical costs, however? I asked candidates and staffs this several times during the campaign if street campaigns were worth the troubles. Their honest answers were that they did not know and were not willing to find out how many votes they would get without street campaigns. In fact, they thought that being seen on the streets and having physical contact (*skinship*, English-sounding Korean term for bodily contact, usually used to mean physical contact in a romantic relationship) with voters were essential parts of the campaign. In-ho told me, in the post-election interview, that having a lot of *skinship* was simply the most important aspect of a campaign. Bo-Ram just believed that, for instance, the street campaign this afternoon helped them get, let's say, some 100 votes without any remotest proof. "After the election, I realized that voters have been silently watching us," she said in the post-election interview. Still, however, their belief did not convince me. All they could do was to inform potential voters only their names and party affiliations without any chance to talk about their policies.

One afternoon, a middle aged man mistook me as a campaign staff and challenged me why he should vote for Bo-Ram with an explicitly disapproving tone while she was talking to other people. I was not prepared for such a challenge because I

did not expect it. He gave me no more than ten seconds to respond and I managed to come up with a couple of reasons to murmur. He turned away seemingly unimpressed by my response. That was the best occasion I could encounter and a similar interaction never happened to me again while shadowing the other candidates. On another afternoon, the city council candidate in the Mountain district visited a community service center, which mainly provided food for senior citizens, and was seemingly close to the Solidarity he co-chaired. All he could do there was watching the members' dance practice before briefly introducing himself. He was able to have a few more words with a couple of people nearby by chance and had me take pictures of him having a warm conversation. It occurred to me that it was only an image that he could deliver to the potential voters in that occasion and he seemed to be happy about having that chance, judging from the fact that he described it as a "good campaign event."

Campaign Repertoires on the Ground #2: Speech Making

Of course, the candidates and supporters made occasional public speeches which were one of the limited opportunities they could talk at some lengths about their platform. And, most of the candidates I shadowed were good orators not least because, as we have seen in the previous chapter, they had been trained to articulate their thoughts in public places. For example, Bo-Ram made the same speech at several different locations. On one occasion, she even climbed a steep hill with a heavy amplifier. Her speech consisted of introducing herself, asking forgiveness for making unpleasant noises, what she did as a district council member in the past four years, and what she would do should she be elected again. The speech was made without a prepared script, and succinctly made point-

by-point. Her style of speech making mirrored the speech mannerisms of a college student association president in the 1990s during the height of student movements.⁶⁴ When Bo-Ram was making a speech in front of an apartment complex, I watched a middle-aged woman listening carefully, half-hiding behind a small gate of the complex, to what Bo-Ram had to say. And, she silently turned away nodding her head when Bo-Ram finished the speech. I was very touched by the woman's sincerity mainly because I had never seen such sincere attitudes from voters before (and even after the occasion). Later while we were moving to another location, I shared the feeling with Bo-Ram and a couple of accompanying staffs. It seemed to make Bo-Ram delighted for a second. "You must have contracted Candidate Syndrome (*hoobobyeong*)," one of the staffs responded to me with a quip. In the context, *hoobobyeong* seemed to be a tongue-in-cheek expression of a candidates' tendency to take a small clue too seriously so that they mistake it as a sign that they would be elected. I think the staff's cold assessment was probably closer to the truth than what Bo-Ram and I wanted to believe. Mostly, the speeches of the candidates I shadowed were either mixed up with the dumbing noises of street traffic or fell on closed windows of high-rise apartment complexes.

Because of the limited nature of street contact in communicating campaign platforms, the street activities we have seen were mostly about making a good impression on voters'. In other words, what the candidates were conveying through street campaigns were not much more than images, not political discourses or even narratives. Especially, In-Ho was keenly aware of this nature. He knew that by-passers in the street do not listen

⁶⁴ It is very difficult to explain such mannerism to non-Korean speakers. For example, when expressing "to realize [a goal]" (*silhyeonsikida*), she used the phrase "to bring [a goal] forth" (*nae-eo-oda*) over and over again, which is one of such speech mannerism in the 1990 student movement circles.

carefully to what candidates say and that all they could do was to show that they are making speeches. Through street speeches, In-Ho tried to convey an image of earnestly begging favors from voters. “Please, please elect just one progressive district council member who can change Port district politics!” He would repeat the same phrase over and over again in a street speech one evening. For another example, one of In-Ho’s candidates rented an electricity-powered tricycle we have briefly seen above as a campaign vehicle instead of a truck due to a shortage of campaign funds. Even though it was a forced choice, he tried to convey an image of new clean politics through the vehicle. “Keep paddling although you don’t have to,” In-Ho directed a campaign staff before he departed the campaign office. It seemed that he thought a human-powered vehicle would better suit the image in his mind.

Election as Social Ritual

The ineffective nature of the campaign repertoires on the ground for political communication we have observed so far makes us less sympathetic with the liberal theories in which election is supposed to be free and fair competition among various political ideas. In my mind, elections are closer to a socially constructed ritual. By rituals, I mean highly structured or stylized repetitive (mostly religious) practices which are believed (at least implicitly by the practitioners) to have some mystical power to bring about desirable effects. Of course, in the context of our discussion of the electoral practices we have seen, the concept is used figuratively. In other words, I do not mean that elections were being transformed into a religion by candidates and their staffs. I believe, however, that likening some of the campaign practices to rituals can elucidate the

ambivalent nature of democratic election, which has been scarcely specified in the democratic transition literature.

In their comprehensive, if not exhaustive, review of anthropological works on the relationship between ritual and political power, John Kelly and Martha Kaplan (1990) show notable disagreements on the political implications of rituals. On the one hand, rituals are viewed to *function* as reproducing already existing power structures in some works while, in other works, they are interpreted as *processes* in which participants are empowered to resist or subvert dominating powers. For example, in the contexts of encountering with colonizing Western powers, natives used rituals as a “social glue” to shore up temporarily disturbed social orders by incorporating the Western presence with categories of their “traditional” cosmology. To the contrary, some scholars, influenced by the Bakhtinian insights of “heteroglossia,” argue that rituals are meaningful actions of participants, in which simply too many variants of meaning are generated for any single authority to control entirely. Thus, if the lack of total control implies the possibility of resistance, rituals can be rebellious and, by implication, a vehicle of social change. Similarly, in their introductory chapter to the edited book, *Modernity and Its Malcontents*, Jean and John Comaroff (1993) contrast views of ritual as something like going through a tunnel where no meaningful stray is possible with views that ritual is to communicate meanings sometimes to a degree of complex and higher order of signification.

Although each side of seemingly contradictory positions may express certain truths about rituals, we need to be careful about jumping into either side too easily. It is highly probable that already scripted rituals contain existing power relationships in their codes. At the same time, rituals are certainly social sites where various meanings

(including rebellious ones) are created and communicated. However, concentrating on this hegemony vs. counter-hegemony controversy may lead us to miss a couple of important aspects of rituals. As Kelly and Kaplan point out, in rituals, participants seldom believe that they are the authors of their actions. Rather, desirable outcomes are believed to be brought about precisely because participants rely on or even incarnate a higher authority (140). In another dimension, the controversy can lead us into a trap of modern/traditional dichotomy as Comaroff and Comaroff argue (xxx). In the end, the differences are resulted from *our* common desires of finding the rationale, if not rationality, of supposed irrational actions of the observed as if rituals are merely political techniques. At worse, putting too much emphasis on either side of the argument may be resulted from a reification of our pre-conception into what is observed. Instead of presuming a certain nature of rituals, Comaroff and Comaroff suggest (xxx), we should recognize that manifested effects of rituals in one way or another are deeply bound by historical contexts. In other words, instead of looking for the supposedly intrinsic implication of ritual in the dichotomy of domination/resistance, we need to delve into what kinds of symbolic, material, and human resources are mobilized to make dominant political orders more visible than resistance or *vice versa*.

The campaign repertoires we have examined can be likened to religious rituals in that the candidates were following highly stylized sets of action without clearly knowing the efficacy of those repertoires in communicating political discourses. And, the repertoires are not just formal empty gestures but are designed to enact meaningful interactions however insignificant each interaction may be. For example, even though bodily contacts such as holding/shaking hands are not welcome among strangers in the

general South Korean culture, such contacts are attempted and usually allowed if an election candidate is involved. The physical contact conveys a message of “we are not strangers anymore.” Although each contact is too negligible to make the message go through, if repeated for a while, the repertoire starts to have even unwanted effects. Moon-Su once told me that running as a candidate makes him/her a recognizable face after the election in his/her neighborhood to the degree that he/she becomes so self-conscious of people’s recognition as to look for back allies to hide in when going out of home.

More significantly, however, campaign repertoires resemble religious rituals in that desired consequences of performance are (believed to be) realized in the mediation of some higher authorities, namely the “people’s will” in the case of elections. Although any election outcome is a mere aggregate of individual voters’ actions, as far as who votes for whom is not revealed, the outcome can be perceived as elusive as some divine revelations. This elusiveness allows those elected to masquerade as the incarnation of the “people’s will,” not as representatives of only those who voted for them, after elections. In this sense, campaign repertoires can be seen as attempts to reach into the elusive people’s minds. It makes elections an arena where the intersubjective understandings between the candidate and voters are more important than the instrumental rationality of campaign platforms. In other words, making logical correct political statements is not enough. A candidate needs to find ways to have voters embrace the statements as well as him/her as a person intersubjectively.

So far, we have examined some of the campaign repertoires on the ground as one of the crucial mechanisms of institutionalized liberal democracy. With these observations,

can it be said that elections are a vehicle of social change as the birds' eye view of democratic transition theories assume? If the pre-transition power holders are still retaining political power as the journalist we have examined above suggests, can it be said that the social ritual of election merely functions to reproduce the existing power relationships?

This question, however, has its limit in that it merely asks whether election can be instrumental to achieving theoretically presupposed voters' best interests such as economic class interests. Anyone who assumes that elections are a mere political venue where voters' best interests are expressed transparently and immediately can be compared to those who run the risk of interpreting a survey result without scrutinizing how it is conducted. The underlying assumption is that every election campaign is a process of strategic design and execution with which the candidate appears to be representing the "best" interests of the majority (in many cases, plurality) of voters. So, every election is shaped by a specific set of strategic designs of the competing candidates. Who has succeeded or failed is determined solely on the basis of the number of votes. Voting is by far the best measurement of the people's will because it is very clear how many people have voted for a candidate. This apparent clarity of measurement, however, does not make any clearer the meanings expressed in an individual vote before aggregated into election results. For one thing, the process of aggregation itself makes obscure various reasons why specific individual voters have chosen specific candidates. Even with the help of exit polls, we cannot be absolutely sure about the complex dynamics in voters' minds. As basic sociological method courses always teach us, apparent correlation does not mean causality.

3. Who Wins Local Elections?

(1) Importance of Building Social Ties

What is it that the number of votes actually measures? The most obvious answer would be the participating political forces' ability to mobilize votes. How are the votes mobilized, then? "It was a gleaning election this time, too," Bo-Ram said to me in the post-election interview. Here is what she meant. Some votes come individually while others come in bunches because some people vote as individuals as liberal political theories suppose⁶⁵ while others vote as members of collectives such as private associations of same origins or schools.⁶⁶ While the major parties' candidates could mobilize votes in bunches, what she could get was largely the individual votes just as poor peasants gathered left-behind grains in the field after the landlord harvests most of the crops. "I have a lot of people supporting me individually. But, they have not been organized into an association working closely in the time of election. That is what I feel I have to do in the next four years." In other words, voters are already suspended in webs of interpersonal ties and a certain tie is deemed to be more important than others during the election processes. From the perspective of the local political forces, their abilities to tap into webs of interpersonal ties are crucial. These webs of interpersonal ties are

⁶⁵ Liberal political theories do talk about influences of organizations and associations. However, in the sense that these organizations and associations are supposed to be based on rationally calculated interests of individuals in liberal theories, it is reasonable to say that the basic political unit in liberal political theories is individuals.

⁶⁶ Throughout the period of rapid economic development which accompanied a great number of rural-to-urban migrations, various sizes of regional associations (*hyangwooheo* in Korean, notably, those of *Honam* [the southwest region] and *Chungcheong* [the middle region]) have been strong vehicles of political mobilization especially in Seoul metropolitan areas. And, school alumni's associations (especially, high-schools) are considered to function similarly.

connected and reconnected through electoral mobilizations. While taking a quick rest during a street campaign, Bo-Ram explained this point to me. “Even though southwest regional associations are generally considered to back the DP, not all such associations do. It depends on who has run a specific association before.”

Generally, the GNP was considered to have stronger organizational capacities than any other parties and the DP had less-than-the-GNP but still significant ones. Multiple informants told me that the GNP had organizing managers usually at the level of *tong* or even *ban* whereas the DP had such managers at the *dong* level. On top of the party organizations, votes were mobilized through private associations. This means two major parties (especially, the GNP) start with certain amounts of votes regardless of their political performances. One day, an NPP campaign staff in the Port district and I went out to change the location of a campaign placard because one of the candidates did not like where it was hung. While looking for an alternative site to hang the placard, the staff commented on the almost enigmatic popularity of the GNP. “They must have saved a country in their previous lives. They have at least 30 percent of the population supporting them even when their political records are pretty miserable.” Saving a country in one’s previous life is a recent South Korean colloquial expression containing the Buddhist (or Indian philosophical) notion of karma which roughly means that what has been done even before one was born must have consequences. In his words, citing something in one’s previous life accentuates the uncanny aspect of the GNP’s popularity, something liberal political scientific theories cannot explain at least as he understood the liberal political theories. Then, he cited a politician who was a renowned labor activist before becoming a (rather successful) politician. “He thought that workers would support him

upon hearing his slogans. He was shocked at seeing some workers even cursing at him, let alone supporting him. It was not surprising that he went to Democratic Liberal Party [a former GNP-line party] afterwards.” In 1992, the politician campaigned for a progressive party largely in predominantly working class districts where he had long been a respected labor activist. No candidate of the party could be elected at that time simply because workers did not support the purportedly pro-working class party. In the sense that what the staff was trying to do was not so different from what the politician above had tried to do, his complex feeling seemed to be understandable.

The staff’s feeling seemed to have something to do with the fact that the local progressives I observed did not seem to have comparable organizational prowess. It appeared that the lack of the organizational prowess was a source of various small difficulties the staff was facing every day. For an hour or so after the conversation, the staff and I drove around to find a better site to hang the placard. It was hard to find a spot better than the previous one because the streets were already flooded with placards of other candidates. When the staff found one, he hesitated because he feared of potential complaints from a shop owner. He told me that shop owners did not like placards hung in front of their shops because it would block the view of their shops behind. But, there were already a number of other parties’ placards besides the spot. Did other parties not fear similar complaints from shop owners? From this observation, we are not sure about what the sources of other parties’ confidence were. From some additional observations, however, we can understand what the fear of the staff was. In the Forest district, Bo-Ram finally got a confirmation from the authorities that a bus line route would be modified to accommodate the local people’s needs. She had been working on it for a while and hung

a placard to spread the news to local people. The next day, Bo-Ram found that the ropes of the placard had been cut. From a further inquiry, she learned that it was the deed of a local branch of a commercial bank which happened to be located behind the placard. The election law was clear. Bo-Ram's action was legal and the branch's was illegal. But, an election period is not a good time to pick a fight with local people. Bo-Ram just had the placard hung again in a similar spot. In the Port district, I also observed a similar incident. During a street campaign, a couple of local election volunteer observers stopped the campaign vehicle, the tricycle-like one we have seen above. They told the accompanying staffs that the voice amplifier was bigger than the legal limit and directed the staffs to replace it with a smaller one. The staffs immediately stopped the campaign and retreated to the campaign office to find out what to do. But, whatever authority the volunteer observers might have, the amplifier had a sticker on it which showed it had already been approved by the local election commission office. The local election observers should have known it. Could any of these incidents happen to two major parties' candidates? I do not know for sure but highly doubt it. It seems that these incidents happened to the local progressives because they were easy targets due to their weak positions in institutional politics, rather than just out of bad luck.

The progressives did try to reach into local people through private connections. Hiring paid staffs seemed to be one of such attempts one could make during an election and In-Ho was quite candid about it. "It is the first time I have ever hired paid staffs for an election. I am doing it because I hope that they will bring a few more votes with them. It shows how serious I am about winning this election." He hired a few such staffs through the networks of local home maid workers he had been involved in organizing.

All he expected the paid staffs to do was stroll around the electoral district wearing shoulder strips in a group of two. In-Ho directed that they would not have to distribute anything or talk to anyone. It was clearly less than the industry standard. Most of such bottom-tier paid staffs I observed were at least distributing leaflets or business cards on the streets. It seemed that it was the social relationships that he was investing in. Election Day monitoring was another job candidates can offer although it is a mere one-day four-hour work directly paid by the relevant local election commission office. Candidates can nominate available people to the election commission and, among the nominees, actual observers are selected through lotteries. A few days earlier than the election date, most of the campaign office I observed were busy with calling people if they would be available for monitoring during the day. In-Ho offered the monitoring job to the paid staffs prior to others, emphasizing that it would not be any work. “Just show up on time when they do the roll-call. That is the only important thing,” he added. Although these work offers do not seem to be a great favor to give, it was in the excuse of such transactions that they could make one more contact with potential voters so that they could solidify the relationships.

Building these relationships, however, does not necessarily mean that their presence among local people is suddenly felt significantly over night. Although the local progressives’ efforts deserve due credit, at the same time, their attempts should not be overly emphasized. In short, when it comes to mobilizing local people’s personal ties, the progressives were still weaker than the two major parties. In addition to what we have examined above, some others seemed to demonstrate the limit of their mobilizing capabilities. First of all, an access to such private connections was not easy to come by.

One evening just before the official campaign period began, In-Ho was to be introduced to a potential paid staff by a labor union organizer he had known for some time. In-Ho and I met the organizer in a restaurant where we were to have dinner together. Because the person to be introduced was late apparently because he was dining somewhere else, we started without the person. The organizer told us that the person had been active in union activities, had a lot of local connections thanks to growing up in this district, and was temporarily out of work at that point of time due to a car accident that happened a few weeks earlier. In the organizer's mind, all these conditions would suit a campaign staff position well. Only after several back and forth phone-calls between the organizer and the person, the person finally joined us, apparently already slightly intoxicated from his previous engagement. In-Ho and the person first introduced themselves to each other. And the organizer and the person updated their personal matters for a while, which seemed to show they were quite close. After some small-talk, the topic of a potential job was finally broached. According to the person, he seemed to already have some political connections with some well-known local DP people. Because the person was apparently reluctant to seriously talk about taking the position and other issues kept interrupting, the conversation hardly made any progress. Because I had to leave early, I could not observe what exchanges were made. Later, I was told that the conversation did not go anywhere further. Even though approached through a reasonably right channel, private networks were not something to be won over with a one-time dinner meeting. Sometimes, such networks presented themselves to candidates. One day during the campaign period, Bo-Ram had a middle-aged visitor who sought her audience in private. Since they talked to each other alone, I did not know what the nature of the conversation was until she told me

that the person suggested that he could help her mobilize some more votes through his personal networks. In exchange, he demanded some “expenses” to do so. In short, he wanted money in exchange for votes. Bo-Ram told me that she had politely refused to give what he wanted. Penetrating into people’s networks was hard for the progressives sometimes because, as we have briefly seen in the previous chapter, they are relative young and new actors in their local political scene. At the same time, it was because they did not have convincing rewards to offer as in the case of In-Ho or sometimes because they were not willing to give it as was the case of Bo-Ram.

This weakness in private networks not only hindered the progressives from gathering more votes but also sometimes came with a more visible heavy price in the election processes. For example, the candidate with the tricycle-like vehicle in the Port district did well initially. In-Ho told me that he had heard, from those who could afford to conduct early opinion polls, that the candidate was in the leader group. After a day or two, the climate quickly changed and the candidate felt it first. The candidate told In-Ho that she was feeling something wrong because a shop owner who had usually warmly welcomed her suddenly started to turn a cold face to her. Their guess was that some bad rumors about her had been spreading. But they were losing critical time to address the issue without being sure what was actually going on. Their response could have been different if they had had better connections with more people. Even though they claimed to represent people better than any other political forces in terms of campaign platforms, the platforms did not make voters any friendlier. One day after the election, Moon-Su said to me “I used to criticize politicians for showing up only during election periods.

Having met with a lot of people in this election, I realized that we could be perceived as the same kind of politicians we criticized.”

(2) “Gleaning” Votes into One Progressive Basket

For the progressives, their best chance to win elections was “gleaning” more reform-oriented votes outside of the already existing two party dominating interpersonal networks. One way of pulling these votes together so that they could increase their chances to get elected was to have a single candidate per electoral district. In fact, the unification of progressive candidates was widely considered in the three districts I observed. Although the idea of unification was widely embraced among the progressives, the specific ways to accomplish such an idea varied across the districts, depending on the strategic choices of groups involved.

What was planned in the Mountain district was the most ambitious of all. Local activist organizations and progressive political parties such as the DLP and the NPP in the district formed a Voters Coalition to nominate one candidate per electoral district through a semi-open primary. It was semi-open because a 30 thousand won (roughly, 30 dollar) registration fee was required to participate. The relatively high level of the fee would qualify those who “really” care about progressive politics. At the same time, the qualification was meant to hinder the mobilization of a wider spectrum of voters. Why would anyone want to limit the mobilization? It seemed to be a result of political compromise between the bigger DLP and the smaller NPP, which would compensate an imbalance of mobilizing capabilities and distrust between them. Despite the safe-guard, however, a controversy around the mobilization process soon followed. The local NPP

accused a candidate from the DLP of paying fees for some claimed participants. The accused responded that it was a result of a minor misunderstanding and no such fraud happened during the mobilization. The authority of the Voters Coalition decided that the number of the alleged frauds was insignificant even if the allegation was true. In response, the local NPP walked out of the frame, citing that the whole system might be corrupted. With one of the important political forces pulling out, the original idea of concentrating organizational capacities into one candidate per electoral district failed, only leaving scars in the minds of the parties involved. When I visited the accused candidate's campaign office following the city council candidate, one of staffs had to calm down another, probably because of my presence, when the topic was broached.

What happened in the Port district was simpler. There was only one electoral district where the DLP and the NPP planned to nominate a candidate in common. Local activist organizations mediated the parties after forming "Common Election Headquarter," a symbolic umbrella organization. After a series of negotiations, they decided to determine the candidate by conducting a one-time telephone opinion survey. The result did not show that there was any statistically significant difference between two candidates. However, the DLP candidate had to accept his narrow defeat, pressured by the local third-party organizations within the "Common Election Headquarter," because they agreed not to include statistical considerations in the determination process.

In the Forest district, the DLP and the NPP failed to agree on the method of unification. The local DLP was willing to concede Bo-Ram's electoral district in exchange of another electoral district where a relatively strong NPP candidate planned to run. Meanwhile, the NPP insisted on opinion survey methods similar to that in the Port

district. As a result, a district-wide unification between two parties did not happen although the DLP did not nominate a candidate in Bo-Ram's district.

One of the reasons why cooperation among political groups is very hard is largely due to the fact that one has to wait four years to have another chance should one lose their chance this time. Four years are far from brief in terms of political time. During the time, material and institutional resources are allowed only to the winners unless there is a resource sharing plan which hardly existed during my field work. Bo-Ram told me that she used to suffer from the dearth of government internal information before elected as a district council member and was "flooded" with such information after. In addition to government information, In-Ho emphasized the level of recognition and respect from civil servants changed drastically after one of his candidates was elected.

The failures to have one progressive candidate per electoral district might spoil some chances to get elected. However, the success or failure of unification did not seem to solely determine the results. First of all, the unifications were largely name-only. In other words, after the unification process ended, the candidates were largely on their own, except claiming that they were the unified candidates. I never observed any concerted efforts to campaign together during the election period even in the Port district. It was probably because they lacked the human, material and organizational resources to help other candidates.

(3) Interactive Nature in Elections

More importantly, the election results were also shaped by what the other candidates nominated by the resourceful major parties did. To examine this point, let us look at some

of the winning conditions in district council elections where progressive candidates in three districts ran, using Boolean qualitative comparative analysis method⁶⁷ first developed by Charles Ragin (1987). The method helps us to identify a combination of sufficient conditions for the outcomes to be explained (Mahoney 2003). Table 4-1 below shows five conditions thought to be relevant⁶⁸ to the result, namely winning elections for progressives.

Table 4- 1. “Truth Table” for Conditions and the Result in the 12 District Council Elections in 2010⁶⁹

Case	3 Elects	Popular	Unified (or Single)	Strong GNP	Strong DP	Result
A	0	0	1	1	1	0
B	1	0	1	0	1	0
C	1	0	0	1	1	0
D	1	0	1	1	1	1
E	0	1	1	0	0	1
F	0	1	0	0	1	0
G	0	1	1	0	1	1
H	0	1	0	1	0	0
I	0	1	1	1	0	0
J	0	1	1	1	1	0
K	1	1	1	0	0	1
L	1	1	0	1	1	1

⁶⁷ It can be very briefly said that this method deepens the logic of methods of agreement and difference into a mathematical style. The methods of agreement and difference are used, in comparative historical analysis where it is not easy to retain a large number of cases such as revolutions, to identify or eliminate probable historical conditions. For example, when one country had the conditions of A and B to have the outcome of C occurring later whereas another country had the conditions of A and D to have the same outcome, we can logically identify the condition of A as probable cause of the outcome C (method of agreement). Similarly, when another country had conditions of B and E without the outcome of C occurring, we can eliminate the condition of B in our consideration of probable cause of the outcome (method of difference). Ragin’s Boolean method helps us make more complex logical decisions as the number of cases and/or variables increases.

⁶⁸ I came up with these variables during the post-election interview with Bo-Ram whose insightful suggestion helped me.

⁶⁹ The data were retrieved from the Republic of Korea National Election Commission homepage (www.nec.go.kr) data base.

In the three districts I did the field work, five progressive candidates were elected out of 12 electoral districts where one or two progressive candidates actually ran.⁷⁰ To account for their success and failure, we examine five conditions. The first condition is whether three candidates, rather than two, could be elected in a given electoral district. As we have discussed above, “3 people electoral district” is thought to be more favorable to minor political groups. I code “1” if a given electoral district was “3 people”; “0” if it was “2 people.” The second condition in the table is whether progressives were popular enough to get 20 percent or more of total effective votes. Although twenty percent is a somewhat arbitrary point, the point seems to be a reasonable threshold in measuring the popularity because it seems to be significant enough to be elected when there are no better alternatives accessible to me. “1” is assigned to electoral districts where the progressive candidate(s) could get 20 percent or more.⁷¹ The third condition is whether a unified (or single) progressive candidate ran in a given electoral district. “1” is coded when only one progressive candidate ran; “0” when a couple did. The last two conditions (Strong GNP and Strong DP) are for examining what the two major parties did. The major parties usually nominate two candidates per electoral district when it comes to district council member election. Whether the two candidates more or less evenly split their supporters’ votes seems to affect the election outcomes for the progressives. “1” is

⁷⁰ There were combined total of 32 electoral districts in the three administrative districts. The fact that progressives could nominate just over one third shows their weak electoral capacities.

⁷¹ In the case of L, although the progressive candidates got just below 20 percent point in decimal level, I assign “1” to the case because the percentage seems qualitatively meaningful enough.

assigned if one candidate got significantly more votes so that the other candidate of the same party becomes unelectable.

Using a computer soft-ware for qualitative comparative analysis,⁷² we can get a combination of the sufficient conditions for the progressives' elections as below:

$$P * t * U + T * G * D * u + p * T * G * D + P * g * d * U$$

(where “*” means logical “and”, “+” means logical “or”, upper-case letters mean the presence of the condition, and lower case letters mean the absence of the condition).

The result can be further logically simplified for the purpose of a better illustration as below:

$$P*U*(t+g*d) + T*G*D*(u+p)$$

This result shows that the progressives were able to get elected when four sets of conditions were met: (1) A popular (P) and unified (U) progressive candidate should run in a “two people electoral district” (t). (2) A popular and unified progressive candidate should run in a district where any candidate from the two major parties was not strong (g*d). (3) In “three people electoral districts” (T), One candidate from the two major parties must be significantly stronger than the other (G*D) when the progressives are not unified (u). And, (4) one candidate from the two major parties must be significantly stronger than the other when the progressive candidate(s) were not significantly popular (p). From this result, it is evident that what the candidates from the two major parties did affected the fates of the progressive candidates as far as the election outcome is concerned. For example, in the case J electoral district, the popular and single progressive candidate could not be elected. Although the progressive candidate got almost 30 percent

⁷² Tosmana - Tool for Small-N Analysis (version 1.3.2).

of the votes, he failed because a single candidate was nominated by each major party, both of whom were aware of the progressive candidate's popularity. Such move from the major parties seemed to be exceptional for similar reasons why cooperation among the progressives was difficult. As in the J electoral district, only visible threats could force them to make such a move. The L electoral district provides a contrary example. Although a couple of progressive candidates split votes, one of them could be elected thanks to the fact that one strong candidate from each major party made the other candidate of the same party unelectable. These examples illustrate the interactive, rather than pre-determined, nature of politics to the extent that every election appears to be unique.

4. Coda

Elections in South Korean liberal democracy are not just an instrument to elect reform-minded politicians as many existing discussions seem to assume. There are too many aspects in elections to be reduced as such. First of all, campaign repertoires on the ground were performed on the backdrops of concrete physical built environments of the city. Like rituals, elections are a series of socially and historically constructed performances and an arena where so many meanings and interests crisscross. For some, it is an employment opportunity. For others, it is a chance to make a profit. Some private networks of interpersonal ties try to show their political prowess since it is an occasion when social connections are attempted to be built and altered. Political images are attempted to be made and remade. Many social dramas of colliding desires are performed during the time. In this sense, the progressives were relatively weak in elections not just

because their campaign platforms were not persuasive enough. Such platforms were only a part of election campaign. From my observations, election processes did not seem to suit for deeper political discussions. Rather, it just showed that their capacities were limited in material, human, and organizational aspects to compete with powerful and resourceful opponents which had been historically constructed.

In a sense, existing power relations are maintained through elections. Most of those elected belonged to either of the two major parties. However, the electoral outcomes were consequences of serious social contestations. The contested nature gave some chances to the progressives, too. Bo-Ram could be re-elected, feeling rewarded for what she had done during the past four years. As one of In-Ho's candidates was elected, the Port district council had the first progressive member in the political history of the district council. With the electoral failure, the Solidarity in the Mountain district started to seek a fresh direction for the organization. The end of the election process seemed to serve as the beginning of new political processes.

Elections are often viewed as in the realm of Realpolitik (*hyeonshiljeongchi*) which usually means that abstract and idealized political theories cannot be directly applied. In this chapter, by examining some electoral practices on the ground, we come to recognize that elections are as much of a specially marked political occasion as an extension of more mundane social processes. That is to say, something called Lebenspolitik (*saengwhaljeongchi*) calls for a different kind of theorizations. It seemed that the progressives were already learning it in their first-hand engagements with elections.

CHAPTER V

HISTORICAL FORMATION OF POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY

AND POSSIBILITY OF COUNTER-HEGEMONY

In the years when world-wide neo-liberal hegemony started to materialize in the Thatcher and Reagan governments on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001[1985]) proposed a new avenue of socialist mobilization. In a nutshell, they argue, the working class based strategy was doomed to fail because the strategy did not take into consideration the necessarily incomplete nature of any identity formation. More specifically, influenced by Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of identity formation, they postulate that social and political identity is formed through social and political inclusion (“we”) and exclusion (“others”) around core desire which is impossible to achieve since the desire itself stems from the very impossibility of fixing the identity,⁷³ instead of being determined by material production relation. Accordingly, the hegemony of capitalism is to be countered, not by organized working class alone, but by inclusion claims of various excluded groups articulated through radical democratic mobilization. Inspired by this theoretical proposition widely known as Post-Marxism, Kian Tajbakhsh (2001) argues that the existence of various identities in metropolitan urban space is by far the best example of the complex and contingent identity formation processes and Marxian urban theories have failed to capture such aspects of urban life because they are not willing to discard the theoretical priority of law-like determining effects of economic

⁷³ In Lacanian psychoanalytic traditions, desire is not a concrete need or demand to satisfy the need but a “surplus” still remaining after satisfaction. Because desire is not directed toward an object but to the lack of the object, it is impossible to satisfy desire.

transformation of urban space though Marxian scholars show varying degrees of flexibility in understanding the determining effects of economic processes.

Although the theoretical perspective above has fruitful empirical implications, their works tend to remain largely at an abstract (and normative) level, even when compared with the Marxian theorists such as Manuel Castells, David Harvey, and Ira Katznelson whom Tajbakhsh critiques. What is more, because the Lacanian psychoanalysis tends to regard the necessarily incomplete nature of identity formation as pre-historically given, as Judith Butler (2011[1993]: Chapter 7) warns, there is a danger that psychoanalytic bearings in the Post-Marxist theory lead to an under-specification of historicity of any given social and political identity formation. In this regard, in order to assess theoretical and practical usefulness of the Post-Marxist (or radical democratic as Laclau and Mouffe would prefer) strategy, we need to critically reflect on the theory against our experiences (or empirical evidence), instead of adopting a few seemingly relevant concepts to explain our empirical perceptions. Another limitation of the Post-Marxist theory is that too much emphasis is paid to discourses. Even though politics can be by and large characterized as a discursive process, as we have examined in the previous chapter, actual political processes are by no means reduced to discourses. Rather, political discourses are intertwined with and expressed through material settings largely accumulated outside of formal political discursive processes. The last limitation important in the context of our discussion is that, although the Post-Marxism takes autonomy of political process seriously vis-a-vis economic process, the characteristics of specific states are seldom taken into consideration. Rather, western welfare state and accompanying liberal representative democracy are posited as the norm.

Built on the arguments and findings in the previous chapters, this chapter examines the historical formation of political subjectivity and the current states of progressive community activism in South Korea as an example of counter-hegemonic mobilization in the context of regarding historicity of political identity formation and possibility of resistance. What is the nature of the current political alignment in South Korea? How has this alignment historically come about? How were the progressives, who are also historical products as we have seen in Chapter III, operating under the political alignment in Seoul at the turn of the second decade of the 21st Century? What are the implications of the progressives' actions regarding mobilizing counter-hegemony? By answering these questions, Post-Marxist propositions very briefly discussed above are examined against a concrete historical context.

This chapter consists of 4 sections and conclusion. In the first section, we critically examine the prevailing perspective that sees state and society as discrete entities. In doing so, a theoretical necessity for a more nuanced approach is put forward. In the second section, we seek to find a way to take the economic transformations into our understanding of the current political alignment of the two-party domination in Seoul. In the next section, we examine the historical processes of state-sponsored selective mobilization during industrial transformations. Lastly, we look at how the community activists organized local resistance under the historically formed unfavorable conditions.

1. State-led Economic Growth vs. Society-led Democracy? A Theoretical Consideration

As the title of a book, *Industrialization and Democratization in East Asia*, written by a renowned South Korean sociologist, Shin, Kwang-Yeong (1999), implies, post-WWII South Korean developments are largely characterized by rapid industrialization, and democratic movements (and the subsequent democratic transition or consolidation). More specifically, Shin examines the processes of industrialization and democratization in East Asia by comparing South Korea and Taiwan to counter the so-called “East Asian Model” of economic growth where authoritarian states were believed to be crucial to economic development. In his view, the commonality of rapid economic growth should be attributed to the similarity of their places in the US-led world system (or international division of labor), rather than authoritarian states, because the actual political processes in the two countries showed more differences than similarities. In so doing, he not only discredits the roles of authoritarian states in economic development but argues that they were actually counter-productive to (past and, more importantly, further) economic development. Although it should be noted that his arguments at large are quite convincing especially from the perspective of post-1997 Asian financial crisis, we need to reflect on two related issues implicit in his reasoning.

First, he views industrialization and democratization as, at least at an analytical level, discrete processes. In the economic development processes, the states appear to be the distributors of resources largely coming from outside of the country whereas, in the political processes, the states are located within the framework of repressive state vs. challenging (civil) society. This (analytical) separation logically leads us to the second

issue that he follows the framework of whether one process is functionally conducive to the other process (Chapter 7). In the end, what he tries to argue is that democracy is a way of raising efficiency in a society at large, which is required to further economic development (283).

These issues are not something peculiar to his arguments. His arguments are based on two theoretical assumptions that state “intervenes” in a market otherwise working according to its own logic, and (civil) society existed prior to the appearance of state and therefore that state is an entity exterior (or foreign) to society. And, these assumptions are rather pervasive in general social scientific discourses. The first assumption is not so easy to hold against historical evidence. The significance of state historically shifted from war-making and the maintenance of internal order to economic transformation (Evans 1995: 5-6). In other words, every state “intervenes” in the market, that is to say, states are always-already implicated in markets. In this regard, as Peter Evans adequately puts, the real question to be asked is “what kind” (10), rather than the degree of state intervention. For this reason, the “political” implications of “economic” performances cannot be easily ignored. For example, when Chalmers Johnson tried to publish an important seminal book in the field of developmental state, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle* (1982), some of his major concerns were not to justify pre-WWII fascist Japan and not to make the readers view the Japanese case a “model” to be readily emulated without considering historical contexts (1999: 39-42). The reason why his examination of the rapid postwar Japanese economic growth appeared to be “dangerously close to a defense of fascism” (51) at that time was not that he intended the book to be,

but that Cold War ideologists perceived the book as such because the ideologists believed the American economic system to be a “free” market system (49).

Meanwhile, arguing against the second assumption of the exteriority of state is more difficult because the demarcation between state and society either at a conceptual or empirical level appears to be clear. From Thomas Hobbes on, the concept of state has always been defined vis-à-vis that of society. The very moment we utter the words (state and civil society) in our sociological narratives, state and society become distinct entities or are even anthropomorphized as monolithic actors. A couple of social scientific works, however, provide us with some room to think of their historical traces of inseparably fused existence. First, as Jürgen Habermas (1991[1962]) shows in his book, *the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, (1) a certain kind of societal settings called public sphere came into being under particular historical conditions in western European countries, and (2) the public sphere was situated in relation to, rather than independent of, state. In short, states were already implicated in the formation of a certain societal alignment called public sphere in historically specific circumstances. For another clue, Peter Evans’s concept of “embedded autonomy” provides us with another look at the state-society relationship. In his view, while the meritocratic recruiting system of civil servants ensured state autonomy in South Korea, the connections between bureaucrats and economic elites (often called *chaebol*) maximized the state’s ability to do its will through private actors (1995: 51-53). The concept of “embeddedness” captures a state of affair in which state bureaucracy has enough internal coherence but is not isolated from society at large. According to Evans, economic elites were neither private actors nor

extended arms of the state apparatus. In the context of our discussion, this insight provides us with a chance to reflect on the complexity of the state-society relationship.

Although insightful, the concept of “embeddedness” has its own (necessary for his arguments) limitation in the sense that Evans nearly conflates state with its bureaucracy and society with economic elites. What is missing in his conceptualization is the larger landscape of politics. Although requiring a lot of qualifying remarks, it should be noted that South Korean politics has been largely managed through formally liberal democracy, perhaps except for a more conspicuous anti-democratic period under the *Yushin*⁷⁴ constitution (1972-1979, often euphemistically called the Fourth Republic or the period of “Korean-style democracy” [*hangukjeok minjuju-ui*]). Throughout the periods of the rapid economic transformations, state elites sought to mobilize South Koreans not only economically but also politically because the nearly constant presence of political opposition forces against the *juntas* made constant political mobilization necessary. In this regard, state and society were historically intertwined in both economic growth and political mobilization. By going beyond the seemingly clear separation between state and society at both analytical and empirical levels, we may paint a more complex picture of the historical developments of South Korean politics as the state and society being historically fused with each other. In doing so, we can better understand the distinct position the community activists occupy in South Korean politics.

⁷⁴ The term *yushin* is a difficult concept to be translated into English. Although the term came from Japanese *iishin* in the *Meiji Iishin* (Meiji Restoration, 1868), President Park Chung Hee’s October *Yushin* in 1972 seems to be closer to “thorough renewal” than “restoration.”

2. Limits of Cross-sectional Measurement of Political Alignment

(1) The Nature of Overall Political Alignment in Seoul

What is the political alignment in Seoul like? As we have seen in the previous chapter, politics in Seoul and South Korea in general is dominated by two major parties—the Grand National Party (GNP; Saenuri Party at the time of writing) and the United Democratic Party (DP). The Seoul metropolitan city council is filled only with GNP and DP members as a result of the 2010 local elections. A DP-backed independent candidate was elected as mayor in 2011 after the GNP mayor who was elected in 2010 resigned in the midst of political disputes over free school lunch programs the DP council majority wanted to push. The GNP mayor organized a popular referendum to reject the DP’s free school lunch program and gambled the mayoral office along with the referendum. The DP members responded to the mayor’s move with a referendum boycott taking advantage of a legal requirement that a third or more of the eligible voters should actually vote in order for a referendum to be effective. Despite conservative organizations’ efforts, the referendum could not meet the requirement⁷⁵ and was declared to be void. Subsequently, the GNP mayor resigned as he promised. The significance of this turn of event is that it demonstrated the limits of the apparently powerful GNP’s electoral mobilization in the political alignment. The limits can be seen clearer when we look at recent election results prior to the referendum.

⁷⁵ 25.7 percent of the voters (about 2.2 million in number) voted in the referendum. Only a couple of wealthier districts of Gangnam (35.4%) and Seocho (36.2%) met the requirement. The data were retrieved from the National Election Commission homepage (www.nec.go.kr).

Table 5-1. Correlation between the Total Number of Votes and Votes for Selected Parties in Seoul⁷⁶

		17th MNA Election (2004)	4th Municipal Elections (2006)	18th MNA Election (2008)	5th Municipal Elections (2010)	r	p(r=0)
Total Votes		4,818,901	3,976,287	3,701,619	4,426,182		
GNP	Sum Total Votes for Electoral District Candidates (NA member or district head)	1,973,313	2,292,402	1,834,534	1,824,996	-0.11391	0.557
	Votes for Proportional Representatives (NA member or city council member)	1,752,221	2,243,473	1,473,477	1,807,719	0.070798	0.4646
DP	Sum Total Votes for Electoral District Candidates (NA member or district head)	2,518,771	1,393,095	1,330,194	2,101,670	0.982235	0.0089
	Votes for Proportional Representatives (NA member or city council member)	2,204,999	1,247,130	1,037,469	1,790,556	0.997702	0.0011
DLP (Combined with NPP after the 2008 split)	Votes for Proportional Representatives	601,447	391,209	287,114	337,958	0.82459	0.0877

Table 5-1 shows the total number of votes, the number of votes the selected parties got in each election between 2004 and 2010 except the 2007 presidential election, and correlation coefficients between them across the elections. The number of votes for the GNP range between some 1.8 and 2.3 million votes for electoral district candidates, and between some 1.5 and 2.2 million votes for proportional candidates. It can be said that the number of votes were relatively stable given that the values of correlation coefficient between the votes both for the electoral district candidates and proportional candidate with the total number of votes are not statistically significant.

⁷⁶ The data were retrieved from the National Election Commission homepage (www.nec.go.kr) data base, and r and p values were added based on the data.

Meanwhile, the ranges in number of votes for the DP were much wider, drastically fluctuating between some 1.3 and 2.5 million votes for electoral district candidates, and between some 1 and 2.2 million votes for proportional candidates. More strikingly, the correlation coefficients are almost 1 (.982 for electoral district candidates and .997 for proportional candidates) meaning that, statistically speaking in terms of r-square values, one vote increase in the number of the total votes virtually accounts for one vote increase for the DP. The numbers of votes for the Democratic Labor Party (DLP; and the New Progressive Party [NPP] after the early 2008 split) were much smaller when compared with those of the GNP and the DP. The correlation coefficient value is less drastic but still similar to those of the DP.

This interesting combination of voting behaviors for the GNP and the DP resulted in the sea changes in the election outcomes of the four elections, as we have briefly seen in the previous chapter.⁷⁷ What the number of votes for each party tell us is that the drastic changes in the election results were decided not by the strong mobilizing capacity of the GNP, but by the degree of voter turnout. The GNP had a strong and tenacious political base which seems to be hard to disappoint, but lacked an ability to expand support beyond its base. The strong but limited base of the GNP was not enough to ensure its stable domination. Interestingly, when we compare the 17th and 18th members of National Assembly (MNA) elections, the GNP candidates got more votes when they were losing.

⁷⁷ In 2004, the GNP got only 16 members of National Assembly elected in Seoul whereas the DP took 32 seats. Four years later, the GNP swept 40 seats leaving only 8 seats to the DP (7 seats) and another party (1 seat). Similarly, in 2006, the GNP took all 25 district head offices in Seoul. Four years later, the GNP got only 4 offices elected yielding 21 offices to the DP.

To the contrary, the DP had a less tenacious supporting base but, with enough *baram* (literally, wind; figuratively, changes in the political atmosphere) from time to time, they could win the elections. The DLP (and the NPP) was the least fortunate political force, getting just a small minority of the votes. They largely failed to convince voters that they were a serious alternative to the two major parties although their reformist agendas such as the free school lunch program became popular enough to be taken on by the DP. Overall, Progressives could not gain enough political recognition under the existing political alignment of the hegemonic GNP and the challenging DP. For this reason, the spread of political cynicism, as we have briefly encountered in the previous chapter, works only against liberals and progressives.

(2) Can Economic Transformation Explain the Political Alignment?

South Korean industrial transformations can be characterized by large scale rearrangements of economic class structure. Because it seems to be reasonable to suspect that changes in economic class structure affect political alignment, we try to examine the relationship between economic class and political orientation. First, how has the economic class structure changed during the economic transformation?

Table 5-2. Historical Changes in Class Composition in South Korea (1960-2003, unit: %)⁷⁸

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2003
capitalist class	3.9	3.84	5.33	4.9	7.4
petty-bourgeoisie	74.11	56.98	51.25	35.4	27.6
agricultural	61.68	45.12	36.24	19.85	9.2
urban	12.43	11.86	15.01	15.55	18.4
middle classes	4.75	8.64	12.77	17.38	20.2
managers	0.69	1.31	2.61	3.25	4.3
supervisors	2.16	4.07	5.41	7.59	8.5
professionals	1.9	3.26	4.75	6.54	7.4
working class	17.23	30.54	30.66	42.33	44.8
skilled	3.58	7.25	9.12	14.55	22.2
non-skilled	13.65	23.29	21.54	27.78	22.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Table 5-2 shows the changes in estimated⁷⁹ relative weights of the economic classes among the economically active population from 1960 to 2003. Among other easily noticeable changes, the industrial transformations not only increased the proportion of capitalist and working class but also, equally notably if not more, built a sizable proportion of the middle classes. During the period between 1960 and 2003, the proportion of middle classes increased from less than 5 percent to above 20 percent.

The increase of these middle classes shows that, during the economic transformations, South Korea underwent a complex stratification process because the middle classes, along with the capitalist class, benefited from the economic transformation more than the working class in terms of income. For example, Shin

⁷⁸ Cho Don-Moon (2011: 89, Table 3-3). Cho adopts Erik Olin Wright's conceptualization of class structure (1997) in his study. The data for 1949 were omitted.

⁷⁹ Cho constructs his table based on sample data.

Kwang-Yeong (2004: Chapter 4) shows that individual class positions⁸⁰ significantly affect the level of individual income. In addition, successive real-estate booms (without significant busts) during the period brought property owners even more significant amounts of wealth than income earned through labor markets. The average land value in Seoul increased 1,176 folds during the period between 1963 and 2007, dwarfing the 43 fold increase in consumer good prices and the 15 fold increase in real income during the same period (Sohn, Nak-Gu 2008: 25). In 2003, some 17 percent of the households owned almost 60 percent of the houses⁸¹ in South Korea and some 33 percent owned just one house each, leaving the rest (50 percent of the household) as renters (Sohn 2008: 50, Figure 1-8).⁸² In South Korea, the uneven real-estate distribution is a more important source of economic inequality given the fact that wealth inequality including real-estate is more significant than income inequality (Sohn 2008: 196-201).

The question of how to understand political manifestations of this economic stratification is still debated in South Korea. Based on voting records of the 2004 MNA election and the 2006 municipal elections in Seoul, Sohn, Nak-Gu (2010: Chapter 2) argues that neighborhoods (*dong*) with more home-owners, among many other factors such as educational attainments and religious affiliations, tend to have higher voting rates and to vote more for the GNP. Similarly, the DP and the DLP tend to get more votes from neighborhoods with less home-owners and lower voting rates in Seoul. Because he uses

⁸⁰ Shin also adopts Wright's conceptualization of class in the study.

⁸¹ Apartments are included.

⁸² Seoul shows a similar trend. As of 2005, approximately half of the households owned one house or more, which was lower than the national average (60 percent) in the same year (Sohn 2010: 31).

aggregate data at the neighborhood level, his arguments are too limited to be conclusive on the correlation between economic status and political orientation at the individual level. Contrary to Sohn's claims, the *Hankyoreh* ran an article which claims that people with lower economic status tend to vote for the GNP, based on an individual level⁸³ opinion poll after the 2012 Members of National Assembly (MNA) election.⁸⁴ According to another article published a day later, an important reason for the "political self-betrayal" is that people with lower economic status tend to think that their own issues are not going to be solved by voting.⁸⁵ In a press release, a public opinion poll agency, Gallup Korea (2012: 4), argues based on its own poll that age is a better indicator of political orientations⁸⁶ and that there was no significant difference in "subjectively perceived economic status" within each age group.⁸⁷ Gallup Korea's claim is more consistent with the study by Shin, Kwang-Yeong et al. (2003: 201-202) which argues that, in South Korea, demographic factors such as age are better indicators of "ideological orientations" than economic class.

⁸³ Although better at "predicting" individual behaviors than aggregate data, South Korean public opinion polls are plagued with their own problem of low response rates. Because usual response rates in opinion polls are less than 20 percent, we need to be cautious about potential selection biases.

⁸⁴ *The Hankyoreh* May 14, 2012.

⁸⁵ *The Hankyoreh* May 15, 2012.

⁸⁶ According to the Gallup Korea poll, older people (especially, people in their fifties or older) tend to support Saenuri Party's (formerly the GNP) presidential candidate while younger people (especially people in their thirties or younger) tend to support a political opposition candidate (among many).

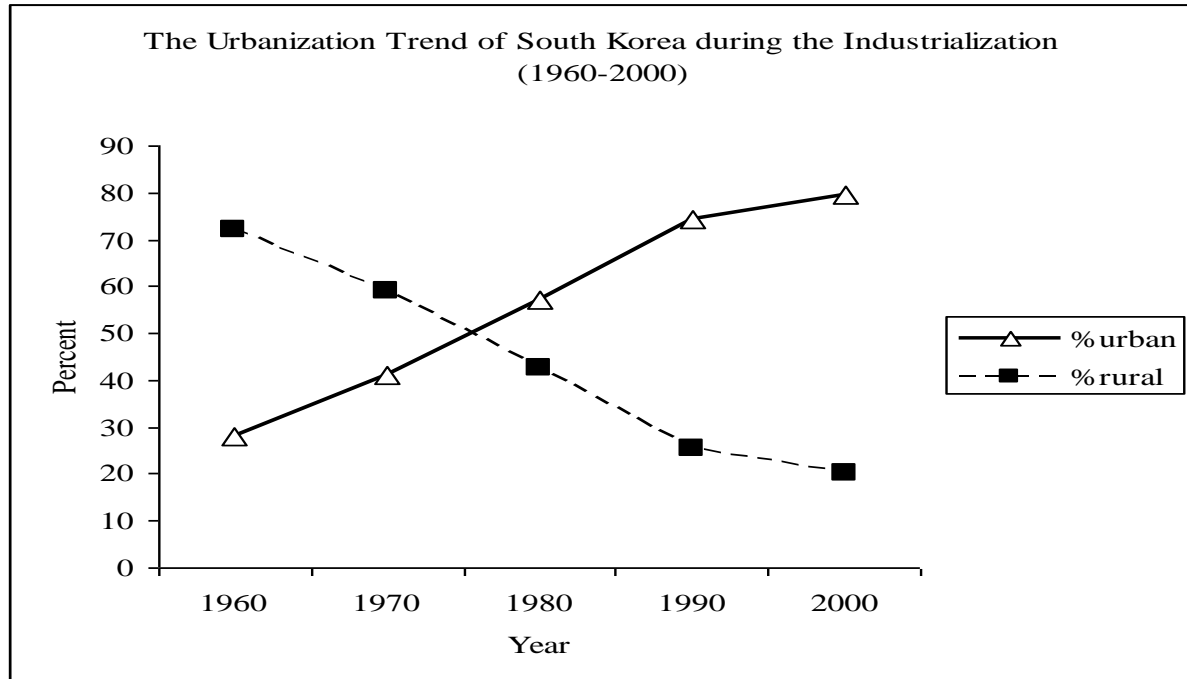
⁸⁷ Gallup Korea (2012: 4) also argues that the effect of educational attainments on political orientation is largely due to the generational differences in the availabilities of education.

The contradictory assertions found between the community level and individual level data seem to suggest the limitations of cross-sectional data currently available to us as a measurement of political mobilization, rather than that one kind of assertion is right and the other is wrong. If we can suspect that interpersonal ties may play important roles in political mobilization as shown in the previous chapter, an important limitation of currently available data is the lack of information about relational characteristics of political mobilization, such as whether social ties affect political orientation, what kind of social ties are more important, and through what mechanism social ties become important in political participation like voting and so on.⁸⁸ In other words, relational factors such as how people are connected to one another and how they are mobilized to political ends may matter in producing certain political outcomes.

The lack of relational data is especially unfortunate because the South Korean industrial transformations seem to accompany the building of myriads of new interpersonal ties followed by a large scale geographic displacement of the population. As shown in Table 5-2, the relative proportion of farmers in the economically active population quite dramatically decreased during the 4 decades or so. In 1960, more than 60 percent of the economically active population was estimated to be farmers (agricultural petty-bourgeoisie in Table 5-2) while, in 2003, only less than 10 percent was estimated to be so. This occupational change occurred in tandem with massive geographic movements of the population from rural to urban.

⁸⁸ Some of the social movement literature such as Gould (1991) and McAdam (1986) suggest the importance of these relational factors.

Figure 5-1. The Urbanization Trend of South Korea during the Industrialization (1960-2000)⁸⁹



As Figure 5-1 shows, during the four decades or so of industrialization from 1960 to 2000, the demographic composition of South Korea turned completely upside down when it comes to geographic location. After the mid-1970s,⁹⁰ South Korea became a predominantly and increasingly urban country. During that time, the population in Seoul increased more than four folds from some 2.4 million in 1960 to almost 10 million in 2000.⁹¹

When we consider this large scale rural to urban migration, the dramatic decrease in the farming population seems to suggest that, within a generation or two, members of

⁸⁹ The data source is the Korean Statistical Information Service homepage (<http://kosis.nso.go.kr>).

⁹⁰ Interestingly, all of the key informants were born in the years around this point. We discuss some of the implications later in the concluding chapter.

⁹¹ The data source is the Korean Statistical Information Service homepage (<http://kosis.nso.go.kr>). Seoul is home for approximately one fourth of the South Korean population (Shin, Kwang-Yeong 2004: 189).

farming households were rearranged into a more urban occupational structure. For a sizable portion of the South Korean population (especially, the older generation), rural community and agriculture is something they left behind.⁹² As hinted in Chapter II and III, new urban villages sprung up with the influx of displaced rural population into cities. At the same time, the large scale geographic displacement seems to be logically related to the proliferation of private associations of same birth-places and school alumni's associations because, in the processes of migration, the displaced people needed to look for and construct new interpersonal connections.⁹³ Social associations of such interpersonal connections are usually viewed (or often condemned) as a "traditional" value (implying its incompatibility with "modern" politics), when it can be said that they are in fact products of "modern" transformations.

We can easily imagine that these urbanization processes were accompanied with various political mobilizations. Especially, the significance of age as an indicator of political orientations seems to suggest that there may be some significant historical shifts in the ways how these mobilizations were shaped. This hypothesis makes it necessary for us to examine the historicity of political mobilization in South Korea.

⁹² As we examine later in this chapter, rural community and agriculture which were destroyed during industrialization became a point of various ideological interventions.

⁹³ Although it is hard to find statistical data on such private associations, explosive increases in religious followers during the same period seem to support this point. During the period between 1960 and 1995, the number of followers for Buddhism increased 8 folds; 8.4 folds for Protestantism; 7.3 folds for Catholicism. The scales of increases are remarkable when compared with only 1.8 times increase in the entire population during the same period in South Korea. Data sources: the numbers of religious followers are retrieved from Seoul Yearbook 1960 and the other data are from the Korean Statistical Information Service homepage (<http://kosis.nso.go.kr>).

3. Historical Formation of the Ideological Polarity

This section attempts to trace historical trajectories of South Korean political mobilizations as a way to understand the contemporary ideological polarity between the right and the left, which seems to partly undergird the two-party domination in local politics. This historical inquiry is meant to complement, rather than replace, the inconclusive explanations of existing works we have examined above, because local politics can by no means be reduced to ideological manifestations. Nevertheless, we need to remind ourselves that any formation of political alignment takes relatively longer in time through a series of popular mobilizations than any cross-sectional data can elucidate.

The Basic Pattern: Selective Mobilization

Before looking at concrete examples of local politics, let us first examine the basic pattern of popular mobilizations. As the South Korean labor processes during the rapid industrialization are often dubbed as “bloody Taylorism,” newly mobilized workers in South Korea had to endure long work-hours and inhumane treatments from repressive managers (Koo 2001: Chapter 3). Given the unbearably difficult working conditions, it is quite remarkable that the frequency and scale of industrial action of workers had not exploded until the early phase of democratic transition in 1987 (Shin, Kwang-Yeong 1994: 312, Table 9-6). Behind this apparently sustained “industrial peace,” Shin (1994: 308-311) argues, lay the state’s “exclusionary oppressive strategy.” According to Shin, the strategy was to coordinate labor laws, administrative practices and physical forces to suppress industrial actions of workers. What is important in the context of our discussion but not accentuated by Shin is the role unions played in the process. As Cho, Don-Moon

(2011: 119-127) shows in his socio-historical study of the labor movements in South Korea, since the right-wing unions replaced the left-led unions under the Syngman Rhee regime (1948-1960), state-sanctioned unions functioned as a state's arm to "de-mobilize" aggravated workers. Rather than becoming a partner to form a ruling coalition, however, labor unions largely remained as bottom-tier semi-state agents to aid repressive labor policies, constantly managed by the state (especially, by its intelligence apparatus). In other words, workers were selectively mobilized by the state as far as the already mobilized workers could prevent further mobilizations.

(1) The Hegemonic Narrative and Semi-governmental Organizations

Advent of Semi-governmental Organization in Local Community: an Example

The selective nature of the basic scheme in which the state mobilizes a limited number of people only as bottom-tier semi-state agents rather than as governing partners was not limited to industrial workers. Kim, Yeong-Mi's historical case study (2009) of three state-chosen "exemplary villages" during the state-sponsored⁹⁴ *Saemaeul Undong* (literally, New Village Movement) shows a similar pattern in rural communities. After the military *coup d'état* in 1961, village-headships moved from the older generation to the younger who returned to their villages after retaining their secondary education in urban areas. Even in the mid-twentieth century, rural communities were intertwined with kinship relationships and pervaded with "traditional" cosmologies. These young leaders set to reform their impoverished communities entangled with kinship conflicts by spreading their learned ideologies of modernization such as anti-superstition, frugality and self-help,

⁹⁴ It is commonly viewed that the movement started when the Park Chung Hee government distributed some 300 sacks of cement to every rural village in 1971.

based on youth and housewives' organizations. While village headships were previously thought to be more of a protector of the village from outside state pressures, these young leaders acted more like collaborators with the state. Upon the arrival of the government's gift of cement, they widened village roads and renovated houses. Although not everyone was happy about widening the roads because villagers had to contribute their land and labor without compensation, young leaders seemed to have enough power to quiet the villagers' complaints. In addition, a state-owned construction company gave the young leaders a contract which gave them an income source, and even lent them a bulldozer one night to flatten a hill which had been thought to be sacrosanct by many villagers for a long time. The gifts also included a voice-amplifying system with which every villager could be reached from the communal center.

How do we understand the young village leaders' actions? Were they merely self-appointed agents of the state's will or independent actors of rural communities (that is, civil society)? The answer seems to be neither or a little bit of both. The ambiguity cannot be easily clarified with a theoretical perspective which view that state is one thing and civil society another. In Chinese studies of rural community, it has been thought that, upon increased state pressure, rural communities either maintained their coherence by isolating themselves from outside ties or were pulverized into atomized individuals (or "modern" social relationships). Rrasenjiti Duara (1988: 246-247) calls for reconsideration of this understanding by arguing that certain communal ties with the outside withered away not because the community closed down ties with the outside. Rather, the ties were weakened because they became irrelevant as a source of communal power, given the fact that ties with the outside withered away only selectively. The implication of Duara's

argument in the context of our discussion seems to be that traditional power sources such as kinship hierarchy became irrelevant to rectifying the impoverished economic state of the communities in the face of modern education, which spread emerging modernization ideologies such as diligence, self-help, frugality and so forth.

In this process of transfer in communal power, the South Korean state was implicated directly through material support as well as indirectly through the facilitation of mass education and mass media which seem to fit the description of what Louis Althusser calls “ideological state apparatus.” Kim, Dong-No (2010: 348) characterizes this process as a seemingly contradictory combination of the state’s repressive mobilization and people’s voluntary participation. He argues that the contradiction could be concealed because the state mobilized people not as self-interested individuals but as simultaneous members of the nation on one level and self-regulating community on another (333). Kim, Yeong-Mi’s case study, however, seems to call for a more nuanced interpretation than Kim, Dong-No’s. Both the postulation of the state as a monolithic actor and the perception of dual levels in the Saemaeul Movement show that Kim, Dong-No relies on the prevailing theoretical framework in which state and society are discrete entities. Although young leaders used state-provided resources and ideologies to engage in communal power struggles, they appear to truly believe in the state ideologies to reform their villages.

At the same time, the limits of such mobilization were clear. Villagers’ voluntary participations were allowed within a very narrow range of state ideologies. Although some of the young leaders became members of Park Chung Hee’s ruling party (*Gonghwadang*; literally, Republican Party), what they could do was mobilizing votes for

candidates picked by national-level political elites in exchange for filling some of their communities' material needs (Kim Yeong-Mi 2009: 215-219). Furthermore, despite the young leaders' efforts, their communities kept decaying. During the mobilization, villagers were still leaving behind their communities in large scales (Kim Yeong-Mi: 347; Kim Dong-No: 348-349).

Contemporary Manifestation

Kim, Dong-No (2010: 344-345) speculates that this pattern of mobilization in urban areas might not be as successful as in rural areas because the state could not afford to give similar gifts to urban areas and urban areas had a different “way of life” which lacked tight communal controls. But, success for whom and to what end? It seems that he assumes that the success was for the state's repressive mobilization. Whatever the level of success might be for the state, the basic pattern of popular mobilization in which some people were recruited as bottom-tier semi-state agents in exchange for resources and power needed for the recruited individuals, local politics was repeated in urban areas throughout the period of demographic and economic transformations. As a consequence, urban areas in South Korea still have, at the time of writing, three semi-governmental organizations (*kwangbyeon danche* or *jikneung danche*)⁹⁵ with nation-wide reach, officially subsidized by the government based on special laws enacted specifically for them, not to mention numerous smaller ones.

⁹⁵ These organizations are the Korea Freedom Federation (established in 1956 first as an Anti-Communism Federation), the Saemaul Undong Center (nominally independent in 1980 as a non-governmental organization), and the Society for a Better Tomorrow (established in 1989).

Although their activities were not the main focus of my fieldwork, a glimpse of these organizations was still felt. On a late autumn day during my fieldwork, I was on a bus to pay a visit to Bo-Ram. At that time, Seoul was about to host a G20 Summit meeting. On the radio, the President was holding a press conference concerning the meeting. “The G20 Summit meeting has been firmly established as the premiere forum of the world economy. As one press expressed, [it] discusses current issues of the world economy and seeks solutions as the acting board membership meeting which actually leads the world economy.”⁹⁶ The President boasted the importance of the meeting and asked cooperation from the people in the prepared address. After the President finished what he had to say, the first question asked to the President, by a reporter from a public broadcasting company, was how he was able to draw difficult agreements in the earlier financial ministers’ meeting despite many pessimistic forecasts. The question seemed to almost congratulate the President achievement during the G20 financial ministers’ meeting. The President’s address and the first question set the tone of the conference as celebratory without representing dissident voices and the celebration was aired live by 8 major broadcasting companies. The celebration was rather modest when compared with a similar press conference a year or so before, when the President proclaimed “in short, hosting a G20 Summit meeting means that, from now on, the Republic of Korea is standing on the central stage of the world, stepping out of the periphery of Asia.”

While listening to the radio broadcast, I saw a number of groups of people campaigning on the street for the successful hosting of the Summit meeting with pickets. According to Bo-Ram, the people campaigning were members of the semi-governmental

⁹⁶ The quotes from the President are my translation.

organizations. She told me that she had seen a district government document coordinating the location and time of the street campaign among the semi-governmental organizations. While members of the semi-governmental organizations were campaigning freely on the streets, protestors against the meeting were largely isolated by riot police within the central districts north of the Han River when the actual meeting was to be held on the south side.⁹⁷

In this regard, the mobilization of the semi-governmental organizations was functioning to suppress or dilute the voices of dissent. At the same time, the mobilized members of semi-governmental organizations were probably happy about the fact that South Korea was about to “stand on the central stage of the world,” and their work to promote this. In doing so, the members of semi-governmental organizations were forged as supporters of the state and its ideology of economic development because economic development is a point of national pride and the state is responsible for this national achievement.

(2) Sanitization of the Counter-hegemonic Narrative under the Democratic Governments

So far, we have examined instances of the hegemonic popular mobilization. And yet, state-sponsored popular mobilizations were not limited to the hegemonic narrative especially after the DP-line parties (New Millennium Democratic Party and Open Our Party) successively seized power in 1997 and 2002. Contrary to the earlier hegemonic

⁹⁷ The isolation was not only physical but also informational. A day later when I went to the strategy meeting of the Solidarity, which we have briefly visited in the very beginning of Chapter II, I saw a female activist refusing to have snacks prepared for the meeting. When people asked her the reason, her answer was that she was in the middle of a hunger strike against the G20 Summit in solidarity with other protestors staging hunger strikes in the central district. I could not have known the fact if I had listened only to major media outlets.

mobilizations which combined physical mobilization with ideological ones, the Democratic governments largely focused their efforts on the ideological realm. In other words, they tried to re-write the master historical narrative of the “miracle of Han River” constructed under the previous authoritarian regimes. And, the new narrative pushed by the Democratic governments were largely drawn from the historical counter-narrative of “*minjung*” (meaning the underprivileged mass) constructed from the mid-1970s to mid-1990s.

Historical Development of the Counter-hegemonic Narrative and its Radical Implication

To be a state ideology, however, the *minjung* narrative needed to be censored or modified because there are inconveniently radical elements within it. The *minjung* narrative was an ensemble of social history (as opposed to political history) and Marxian social sciences fused under a larger umbrella of the Third-World (post-)colonial nationalism⁹⁸. From the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, historians such as Kang, Man-Gil and Kim, Yong-Seop started to look for internal moments of modern capitalist transformation occurring in the Choseon Dynasty (1392-1910) of Korea, and their findings of growth of commerce and the appearance of “manager-style wealthy peasants” (*kyeongyeongheyong bunong*) in the late Choseon period were formulated as the “buds of capitalism” thesis (*jabonju-eui maeng-aron*). Subsequently in the 1980s and 1990s, frequent peasant uprisings in the very last periods of the dynasty, which culminated in Dong-Hak Rebellion⁹⁹ in 1894,

⁹⁸ For a concise historical account of the Third-World nationalism, see Young (2001) Part IV.

⁹⁹ In South Korea, the rebellion is often called Dong-Hak Revolution because the term revolution has historically been thought to carry positive connotations. Park Chung Hee famously claimed that his military coup in 1961 was a revolution even though revolutionary spirits quickly faded away within a year of the coup.

were taken as signs of the final decay of the “feudal” (read pre-modern or pre-capitalist agrarian) system. Therefore, logically, the intervention of foreign forces which frustrated the internal moments were considered as twisting the “natural” developmental path of the Korean nation. In this perspective, resistance movements against both internal and external rulers until the colonial period (1910-1945) and even the post-colonial era could be characterized as “anti-feudal” and “anti-imperialist” struggles. This historical perspective continued to the Marxian social scientific inquiry of the contemporary South Korean society, by social and student movement circles. The overarching theoretical presupposition of the inquiry was that the Korean nation failed to achieve the “normal” preconditions of a “modern” nation state: autonomous nation state and independent national economy. For the Marxian academic researchers and activists, *minjung* were suffering largely due to these failures, and the solution was an ascendancy of *minjung* into powerful positions through a National Liberation People’s Democratic Revolution (*minjok haebang minjung minju hyeokmyeong*; NLPDR). The subjectivity of *minjung* here was a theoretical construct in the historical counter-narrative rather than an empirical entity. Kenneth Wells (1995: 13) expresses this point succinctly.

[S]ince its logic of historical development leads to minjung ascendancy, minjung history is predictive. This can be understood in a strong sense, where society is understood to proceed according to scientific laws: in a weak sense, where the prediction goes no further than that the minjung will (or does) take charge of Korea’s history; or in a conditional sense, where it is claimed that, *provided* the minjung are given charge, Korea’s history will follow a certain desirable course. But, whichever sense applies, history that does not have this predictive bent, based on a minjung-centered interpretation of history, is not minjung history. (The italicization and non-italicization are original)

In other words, the theoretically conceived entity of *Minjung* was meaningful only in the

context of the counter-narrative which logically leads to the necessity of a revolution.¹⁰⁰ As Cho, Hee-Yeon (1989: 30-35; 1991: 18-22) argues in his overviews of theoretical and practical debates within activist circles, at the end of the 1980s after successive debates over movement strategies in the decade, the political orientations of South Korean radical activists were largely divided into two camps of NL- and PD-line factions, both of which called for a revolution. The NL-line factions which, above all, aimed to retain national autonomy from foreign forces (mostly, the US) viewed South Korea as a colonial and semi-feudal (and later semi-capitalist) society and claimed *minjung* to be organized in a form of a united popular front against the foreign forces and their puppet state. Meanwhile, the PD-line factions argued that South Korea was a neo-colonial state-monopoly capitalist society and that, in a capitalist society, the revolutionary agent and the leader of *minjung* should be the working class. Although, in the face of increasing ascendancy of reformism after the collapse of the Eastern Block and the election of a former pro-democracy leader, Kim Young Sam as the President in the early 1990s, many activists publicly gave up their radical doctrines, newly organized independent labor unions (*minju nojo*) and other social activist organizations were under the sways of the remaining radicals. And cultural representations of *minjung* remained as radical as before throughout the 1990s although actual prospects of a revolution increasingly faded away.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Kim, Dong-Chun (1991: 289, footnote 1) argues that existing revolutionary discourses drew the characteristics of political subjects either directly from economic class structure or from presupposed political agendas. These tendencies, he views, were closer to intellectual “showing-off” with little practical utilities.

¹⁰¹ For the relationship between radical activists in labor unions and other organizations and the factional conflicts within the DLP, see Jeong, Yeong-Tae (2011). One of the cultural representations of the *minjung* narrative can be found in a song titled “Gaja! Nodonghaebang”

Removing Revolution for the New State Ideology of Democracy

This radical implication (that is, revolution) in the *minjung* narrative proved to be difficult for the Democratic governments to swallow. A safer alternative for the Democratic governments was democracy. For instance, the Korea Democracy Foundation (established as a public institution based on a special law in 2001) was to take the radical *minjung* narrative into the safer “mainstream” ideology of democracy. In 2007, the Foundation published a book, authored by a renowned historian, Seo, Joong-Seok, which explicitly describes South Korean history since the end of the WWII as a path towards democracy. In the foreword of the book, the president of the Foundation at the time, Father Ham, Sei Ung, celebrates the 20th anniversary of the “June Democratic Uprising” in 1987 as follows:

Democracy in Third World countries was belatedly achieved with many difficulties, compared with many Western countries where democratic development started in the early modern age. The reason was that most Third World countries liberated from colonial rule and foreign tyranny became subject to military rule and domestic tyranny, which hindered democratic development in these nations.

Democracy in South Korea has also gone through a difficult process of this kind like other Third World countries. Furthermore, Korea had to face even

(roughly translated as “March to Labor Liberation”). The song was adapted from a Polish song which commemorates the death of a union member, an important event in the pre-history of the Polish Solidarity movement. The initial adaptation is thought to be first released in 1992 and due to the popularity of the song it was reproduced in 1995 as a part of the “Official Labor Song Album” (*Nodong Gayo Gongsik Eumban*). Although the tune is very similar to the Polish original, the lyrics are very different and quite radical. Following is a part of the South Korean lyric:

“Even though we may be defeated 99 times, [all we need is] one victory. One victory!
Coming over the barricades [is] finally labor liberation!
Unstoppable our struggle, none can block us.
Between workers and capitalists, there can never be peace.
Great Labor, [with] the very strong fists, open History by stopping the machines!
Workers’ army with bloody banners, march to labor liberation!” (my translation)

more ordeals than many other Third World countries due to the Korean War and national division, and also to the geopolitical position of the Korean Peninsula on the frontlines of the worldwide Cold War.

South Korea is nevertheless recognized as a nation that has overcome those ordeals and successfully developed a democratic government. In opposition to the dictatorship, the democratization movement finally caused the collapse of the authoritarian regime. This movement had the help of many people's efforts and sacrifices, and it led South Korean society on the road to democratization. Democracy in today's South Korea was achieved through a dynamic and peaceful process even in the face of very harsh conditions. Because of this unique history, South Korea is considered to be a case of particular interest among Third World countries, and can be looked upon as an example worth studying in many countries. (Ham, "Foreword" in Seo 2007: 5-6)

According to the passages above, democracy is a national achievement of South Korea which can be suggested rather proudly to other countries as something to learn from. Just as was shown in our examination of the hegemonic mobilization, the state is conflated with the national achievement yet this time in the sense that the existence of democratic government is the very proof of such an achievement. It is declared that the democratic movement (in singular) led to the democratic governments.¹⁰² From this perspective, the

¹⁰² This celebratory tone is in contrast to ambivalent attitudes of progressive scholars at the 10th anniversary of the June Uprising. The 10th anniversary was just before the Democratic governments in Korea.

There are various assessments of the June Democratic Uprising. The June Democratic Uprising is a great victory in that an elongation of the Chun Doo Hwan military regime was prevented by the force of *minjung* as well as the starting point that led our society to a path of democratization by refuting the rule of the military dictatorial regime. Due to the fact that it was pan-citizenry resistance against the military dictatorial regime, it is often considered to be an anti-dictatorial democratization movement memorable in our history. Also, it cannot go without saying that the June Uprising was the moment in which an agenda of our society has been concretized as autonomy [from the foreign], democracy, and [national] unification. In this regard, the June Uprising was fully haired from the tradition and spirit of the Dong-Hak Peasant War and Anti-Japan Independence Movements far back in time as well as recent events such as the April Revolution* and the May 18th Gwangju Minjung Uprising. For these reasons, as we cannot say anything about National Democratic Movements in the 1980s without mentioning the Kwangju Uprising, we cannot say anything about the democratization without the June Uprising.

Meanwhile, the results of the June Uprising were neither flamboyant nor

Foundation has engaged in citizenry political education and the publication of academic research on democratization.¹⁰³

Of course, the Foundation was just one of the state's endeavors to subsume the past student and social movement experiences under the rubric of democracy. Some of the "mysterious deaths" under the circumstances of state repression were re-investigated.¹⁰⁴ The victims of state repression on social activism were acknowledged by

hopeful. Even though it cannot be said that there has been no achievement, it was wrongly batted up from the very beginning. [It was shown by the facts that] the result of the June Uprising was that the Rho Tae Woo military regime and the opposition majority [in the NA] and the clearance of the 5th Republic [the Chun Doo Hwan presidency] ended in a 3 party merger. As a result, as hopes towards the future were peppered with frustrations, expectations from the democratization have quickly turned into rage. The [hope for] democratization prematurely faded away from the waves of reactions and the discourses of reform was revealed as every kind of corruption. Is this reality not the justice of History? How do we explain this reality? (Kang, Jeong-Gu et al. "Preface," in Haksuldanche Hyeop-euihoe [Council of Academic Organizations] 1997: 5-6, my translation. * In 1960, the Seyngman Rhee government was overthrown by people who were enraged by widespread corruption in the Presidential election held earlier.)

In the context of our discussion, a couple of points stand out in the statement above. First of all, the progressive scholars criticized the democratization process of the time based on *minjung* narrative. In other words, they located and evaluated democracy within the framework of revolutionary change, rather than subjecting the *minjung* narrative to the democratization as a sub-category as the state ideology seemed to do less than a decade later as shown below. Although the difference is very subtle, in my view, it is important to point out here in that it shows the process of transfer in counter-hegemony from resistance movements to the state. Second, in their statement, a democratic regime change (transfer of state power) was an important evaluation standard. For the progressives, regime change seemed to still matter.

¹⁰³ For an interesting instance of research publications, the Foundation published a couple of books (Yoon, Sang-Cheol et al. 2006; Yoon, Sang-Cheol et al. 2007) which attempt to quantify the degrees of democratization in governmental, congressional, and societal realms and the relationships among them as a form of indices based on "experts" and general opinion surveys and other data on social and political developments. It is interesting because the attempt resembles the "blend of social science and reform sensibility-of advocacy *through* objectivity" (O'Connor 2001: 26, original italicization) in the US of the Progressive Era when "poverty knowledge" started to be formed. After the analysis of the quantified data, the authors assert that "every member of our society live "for more democracy"" in the last sentence of the book. (Yoon, Sang-Cheol et al. 2007: 100, original quotation)

¹⁰⁴ The city council candidate in the Mountain district we have followed in the previous chapter

the state for their “contribution to establishing the democratic *constitutional order* and restoring and extending citizens’ liberty and rights.”¹⁰⁵ The state designated June 10th, an important date in the 1987 June Uprising, as the June Uprising National Memorial Day. These actions were an expansion of the scope of state’s acknowledgement towards past social activism following the precedence of the Gwangju Uprising commemoration. The Gwangju Uprising was designated as the “May 18th Democratic Movement” and later became a national memorial day on President Kim Young Sam’s watch. Under President Kim Dae Jung, a special law to enable state compensation for the victims of state violence in the incident was passed and the burial site for those killed during the Uprising and later activism became a national cemetery. Linda Lewis (2002: 165-166) observes the commemorations of the Gwangju Uprising as follows:

[B]y the end of the decade [the 1990s] even the leaders of the victims’ groups in Kwangju had begun to disavow the “anti-government style” characteristic of past commemorations. Indicative of this shift in public sentiment was the disappearance, in May 1998, of the familiar protest tunes; normally played and sung continuously all over town, by the eighteenth anniversary their militant, radical lyrics were deemed no longer appropriate to the occasion. Along with depoliticization has come commodification, as well, as the Uprising has begun to be packaged as a tourist attraction. The twentieth anniversary saw the introduction of a cute cartoon 5.18 mascot, Nuxee, whose visage graces T-shirts, post cards, ballpoint pens and other souvenir items available for sale in the May 18 Cemetery gift shop, presumably designed to appeal to visiting groups of school children.

According to Lewis, the state’s involvement in the commemoration processes resulted in a selective mobilization. While radical voices of student protesters and a direct victims’ group were sidelined sometime with riot police, those who appropriate the occasions to

was an investigator.

¹⁰⁵ The phrase is quoted from the “certificate of democratization movement related person” issued by the state under President Rho Moo Hyun. The certificate is bound by a special law and comes with a state compensation. Emphasis added.

re-decorate the images of the city of Gwangju as a center of seemingly universal values of peace and human rights ascended into the hegemonic position. Although usually militant labor unions were invited to the official ceremony, it was only after they toned-down their rhetoric.¹⁰⁶

As we have seen in the case of the *Saemaeul Undong* above, there is an ambiguity as to whether the tension expressed in the processes of the Gwangju Uprising commemoration was because of national level state initiative to sanitize radical elements in the narrative of Gwangju Uprising or internal conflicts within local politics. What is certain is that the re-arrangement in local power relationships was accompanied by the Democratic governments' attempts to remove the radical connotation of the counter-narrative.

¹⁰⁶ It was a matter of time that the hegemony holders turned preachy. For example, Park Sang-Hoon (2011), Ph.D. holder in political science and publisher, urges activists not to be afraid of doing politics by which he largely means institutionalized party politics. After waving a book by a Civil Rights Era community activist Saul Alinsky among many other classics of political science, he exhorted the readers to “work within the system” (53). He expresses his basic sentiment as follows:

When I am listening to those fond of self-proclaiming themselves as “radical” or “left,” a couple of thoughts occur to me. One is that they seem to feel being themselves by criticizing others. It is because most of what they say consists of curses towards everyone else. The other problem results from their fundamentalist attitudes. (Park 2011: 54, my translation)

This statement parallels interestingly with what Lewis (2002: 165) quotes, in one of the epigraphs of her work, from a remark of a May 18th organization leader, made in 1997:

Now, as an unhappy era has been brought to a close and history is victorious, 5.18 is approaching a second stage, changing to a spirit of universal humanity. Accordingly, the underlying tone of the commemoration events themselves must be stripped of the so-called anti-government struggle style of the past.

(3) “Imagined” One Nation and “Real” Ideological Conflicts

Certainly, as the selective nature in both the hegemonic and the new state ideological mobilization shows, it is more reasonable to assume that state-implicated political mobilization did (or could) not turn the entire population into one form of political subject or the other. Despite the limitation, what the popular mobilization attempted to do was construct images of one nation and the significance of the state as the center of the nation and as an undividable entity from the society, largely by suppressing dissent. On what tangible experiential bases did (or could) they claim the certainty of one nation, however? In this regard, the frequent appearances of rural scenes in political representation seem intriguing. Why have images of presumably “backward” left-behind rural scenes repeatedly appear in various media as something representing the nation when the modernization projects of industrialization and democracy were the ultimate goals of the nation?

Figure 5- 2. Images of Rural Scenes in Political Representations



(Left: Shin Hak-Cheol. *Monaegi* [Rice Transplanting], 1987. Upper Right: Park Chung Hee [far right] sharing *mak-geoli* [crude rice liquor] with farmers during rice transplanting work. Middle: Rho Moo Hyun [far right] sharing rice liquor with people with a “farmers” wheat-thatch hat. Bottom Right: President Lee Myung Bak [center] sharing rice liquor with farmers during rice transplanting work.)

The pictures in Figure 5-2 are political (or politically motivated) representations across the political spectrum in South Korea, ranging from radical *minjung* art to a DP President to a GNP President to a military dictator. These images circulate among the public so widely that one can find similar pictures through simple internet search. Shin Hak-Cheol's oil painting is arguably one of the most important visual representations of the *minjung* narrative as often called *minjung* art (*minjung misul*). The painting seems to yearn to restore a unified peaceful national community (given its depiction of a North Korean mountain in the background) by clearing foreign (mostly the US) military and cultural influences.¹⁰⁷ Pictures showing Park Chung Hee working along with and sharing food with farmers, like the one shown above, were not rare in photo collections of his presidency. It has been well-known in South Korea that Park Chung Hee was fond of calling himself a son of peasants. The picture seems to paint him as a benevolent national leader who has not forgotten his roots. Such propagandistic attempts must have been perceived as compelling given that they were annually mimicked by his successors until

¹⁰⁷ Often, poverty was represented on the background of the rural and migration to the urban. A song titled *The Way to Seoul* (originally released in 1972), written by Kim Min-Gi, a renowned South Korean folksong writer and musical producer, shows such a tendency. Following is a portion of the lyrics (my translation):

Only after three years since my parents lay ill, I have unearthed all the herb roots
in the back hill and served to them.
Who's going to do? Caring for the old parents?
Why is it this far? The way to Seoul.
(...)
Until I am back getting better medicine, don't change the color, the elm tree in
front of home!
Who's going to do? Caring for the old parents?
Why is it this far? The way to Seoul.

This song was "banned from broadcasting" by the *Yushin* government in 1974 until 1987, a texture of poverty is expressed through the usage of herbal medicine (as opposed to modern medicine) and sadness of the family separation.

the Kim Dae Jung presidency (and Rho Moo Hyun). As shown in the bottom right picture, President Lee Myung Bak seems to seek some political benefits by reviving the tradition after a decade of Democratic Governments. Many pictures of Rho Moo Hyun depict him surrounded by ordinary people as shown above. After his presidency, he retired into a rural area to experiment organic rice farming methods until his tragic suicide after prosecutors started to investigate his alleged corruption case.¹⁰⁸ A “farmers” hat Rho Moo Hyun puts on in the middle picture was not meant to be missed. This type of hat is a symbol of rural farm life in a sense that it was something of the past as it was a must-have item of college student rural service troopers (*nonghwaldae*) although actual farmers usually do not wear this any longer, as the Lee Myung Bak picture shows.

The similarity in the use of rural scenes for political representation across the political spectrum suggests a couple of important points in the context of our discussion. First, the commonality of rural experiences was one of the important political resources to mobilize people into a nation during the period of tumultuous social transformations. In this regards, the proliferation of private associations such as those of regional origins and school alumni and their political implications can be viewed as historically specific products of social mobilization in the modernizing of South Korea rather than mere vestiges of traditional values.

Second, more importantly, such mobilization was conducted around of the idea of peacefully integrated rural community which did not exist or allegedly existed in the past¹⁰⁹ and was almost impossible to restore after the industrial transformation. Similarly

¹⁰⁸ The case was dropped inconclusively just after his death on the ground that the main suspect was deceased.

¹⁰⁹ As we have seen in the discussion of two women’s autobiographies in Chapter 2, their

as Laualu and Mouffe (2001[1985]) argue, the (near) impossibility of fixing the identity of the nation have entailed social conflicts over the issue of the exclusion and inclusion in the identity of the nation in South Korea. In other words, as the peaceful national community has increasingly become “distant memories” and is perceived to be badly tainted beyond the point of restoration, efforts to find the culprits tend to follow.

During the period of the Democratic governments, right-wing backlashes against the state-sponsored democratization narrative started to materialize into various scales of anti-government resistance. The underlying nature of such mobilizations was anti-North Korean and pro-American. For many right-wingers, North Korea was the one that started the internecine war and the US was the one that militarily and economically helped “us” when “we” were badly in need. “Go to North Korea if you don’t like the South Korean way!” Hearing such angry shouts was not uncommon experiences under the Democratic rule. Although many progressives attempted to differentiate themselves from the Democratic power-holders by calling Democrats neo-liberals based on the age-old *minjung* narrative,¹¹⁰ the claimed differences were easily lost or intentionally ignored by the right-wing mobilizers. For them, the progressives were merely the “second company” of Democrats. Many older generation people were especially quick to tap into such sensibilities. Meanwhile, for many people especially of the younger generation, such

memories of youth experiences are beautified although the traces of poverty can be clearly noticed. Let us recall that one of the women even stated that her rural dwelling was much better than the first one she had in Seoul.

¹¹⁰ For example, in 2005, Chumo Yeondae (Commemoration Solidarity) along with other activist organizations published a two-volume book which commemorates the deaths of activists and victims of state repression since the founding of South Korea as an extended edition of a similar book originally published in 1997. In the book, nearly 80 “martyrs” were enlisted in the period under the Democratic governments which is designated as a “Period of Neo-liberalism” when economic polarization deepened and workers’ living conditions deteriorated (Chumo Yeondae, et al. 2005: 2-11; 160-163).

mobilizations appeared to be based on the rather anachronistic “Cold War viewpoint.” Heightened corrosive political rhetoric was exchanged between conservatives and liberals as the former position started to be called “*su-kol*” (reactionary dumb-heads) and the latter was labeled as “*jwa-pal*” (left commies). In the context of our discussion, the question of which side is right is beside the point. What is important here is that each side views the other as the one thwarting the harmonious integrity of “us.”

Although the Lee Myung Bak administration (2008-2012) claimed its policy orientation as centrist pragmatism, the government quickly chose to get along with the right-wing mobilizations from the very beginning as large scale resistance was mobilized around issues initially from loosening regulations on US beef imports later to a partial privatization of health care and to planned canal construction projects in four major rivers. The ideological attitudes of various government apparatuses were less than flexible. In fact, the government seemed to start a new round of selective popular mobilization to suppress its political opponents, based on historically inherited ideological confrontation. For example, the Ministry of National Defense officially published a list of 23 “unsound” books (*buron seojeok*) including largely Keynesian economist Ha-Joon Chang’s *Bad Samaritans* (2007, Korean Edition). The Supreme Prosecutors’ Office proclaimed “clearing left North Korean followers” as one of their organizational objectives and allowed an anti-North Korean exhibition to be held in the lobby of their building. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism unduly¹¹¹ dismissed some of the Democratic government-appointed heads of public cultural institutions such as the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea (MOCA), the Korea National

¹¹¹ Later, the Supreme Court annulled the government’s dismissals of the former heads of the MOCA, the KNUA and the ARKO one after another.

University of Art (KNUA) and the Art Council Korea (ARKO) after labeling them as “individuals of the former government” which was an indirect way of saying “left.” The Ministry of Education, Sciences and Technology pressured authors and publishers of secondary school contemporary history textbooks to revise ideological “biases.”

4. Neo-liberal “Growth Machines” and People’s Resistance

Our community activists were operating in this doubly suffocating condition in the sense that they were sandwiched between the resuscitated hegemony of the economic development narrative and the revamped counter-narrative of democracy. It was suffocating partly because the progressives had never had a resourceful national level government sponsoring their mobilization efforts. The 2008 split of the DLP merely made the situation worse. The lack of an ideological and material sponsor at the national level was not what they had chosen for some ideological reasons. Rather, it was what they were bequeathed in the course of historical developments. After the 2010 municipal elections ended, some members of the DLP and the NPP started to discuss the necessities of building a larger national level party mostly by merging the DLP and the NPP.¹¹² However, the lack of a national level sponsor did not make the progressives entirely disconnected with institutional politics or isolated within their own communities.

¹¹² At the time of writing, the attempt seems to have mostly failed. It did not go smoothly from the beginning as the NPP rejected the merger after fierce internal debates. Members who advocated the merge within the NPP nevertheless left the party to build a new party later called the United Progressive Party (UPP) with the DLP and smaller Citizens’ Participation Party. In response, the NPP initiated its own merger with the smaller Socialist Party. Although the UPP was able to garner 13 seats in the NA in the 2012 MNA election (while the NPP failed to elect any), the party was divided later after a series of internal fights. The two major groups in 2010 were rearranged into three larger groups in 2012 after the 2-year reshuffling.

Keeping this in mind, let us examine some instances of the progressive community activism in the context of our discussion of the possibility of resistance mobilization.

(1) Omnipresence of “Growth Machines” in Local Politics

The heightened ideological conflicts between the supporters of the two major parties we have examined in the previous section seemed to have little bearing in local politics when it comes to the functioning of “growth machines” (Logan and Molotch 1987). Meanwhile, the historically accumulated legacies of state-sponsored selective mobilization seemed to help the efficient functioning of the “machines” at virtually every level of local governments.

In the newly assembled district council in the Forest district after the 2010 elections, one of the first agendas on Bo-Ram’s committee was to decide whether the district government would accept a gift of a land plot from a private developer. The context of the gift was that the company wanted to build an expensive condominium complex in front of the national park area which partly belongs to the district. The civil servants who were responsible explained to the committee members that the district needed the land plot for a necessary additional sewage facility and repeatedly gave assurances that accepting the gift did not imply an approval of the developer’s plan at the district level. The gift was coordinated at the metropolitan city level that had the ultimate authority to approve the plan and, according to the civil servants who testified at the committee, the assurance came from city officials.

The decision seemed to be tricky. If the district government accepts the land, it can be used against those who oppose the construction or a rationale for the district

government's collaboration (or at least inaction against the plan, which means an implicit approval). The gift of seemingly much needed land was too good for the committee to reject without a very compelling reason. In the end, the committee approved the proposal on the explicitly stated condition that the acceptance of the land did not have any bearing on the district council's attitude towards the construction plan.¹¹³

In the Port district, some local people were fighting against an educational foundation's plan to build a private elementary school and two secondary schools just beside a public elementary school on a hill which was one of the few remaining undeveloped green patches of land in the district. The hill had been cherished by some local people since they defeated the metropolitan city government's plan to build a water storage facility on the hill in the mid-2000s. In addition to destroying a communal green patch, some parents of those who were attending the public elementary school were concerned over their children's safety during the construction. It was also a symbolic struggle against the private elementary school which was expected to be attended by children of wealthier households. Relevant approvals had been already made at the level of the city government before the previous city educational superintendent was convicted of corruption. Local activists occupied the construction site while appealing to the city government. Their appeal was declined as the activists were forcefully removed from the site by a security firm. Towards the end of my fieldwork, the only thing the activists could do was pressure the reluctant district office to strictly enforce construction safety regulations on the construction site.

¹¹³ At the time of writing, construction is underway despite unfavorable public opinion in the district, perhaps because no member of the committee explicitly supported the construction plan at the time of the approval. Later, an internal audit of the metropolitan city government revealed that civil servants both at the city and district level generously relaxed administrative regulations for the construction.

In the Mountain district, Moon-Su was attending a public hearing with other staffs of the Solidarity on the issue of developing a local stream. The gist of the plan was turning the local stream into a well-decorated public park. The Solidarity's concerns were largely two folds. The plan had not paid enough attention to the ecology of the stream and the maintenance expenses after the construction would unnecessarily burden the district government's budget in the long run. The hearing was attended by the newly elected DP district head, representatives of various levels, and about a couple hundred people. I was surprised by the fact that so many people were attending a public hearing on an ordinary work day afternoon. "They are mobilized people," a staff of the Solidarity explained to me. In the South Korean context, "mobilized" (*dongwondo*) is usually used to describe people who are requested, ordered, or even paid by a higher authority to attend a meeting or gathering. By using the word, the staff implied that the people attending were not genuinely interested in the public hearing.

Regardless of whether they were concerned citizens or not, the tone of the hearing was celebratory just as President Lee's press conference on the G20 Summit was. A big chunk of time was spent on introducing local politicians to the audience. The district head addressed the attendees to express his general approval of the plan. The developer represented the plan with beautifully drawn pictures. After a series of timely applause, no questions were asked. Concerned people like the staffs of the Solidarity were not given a chance.

(2) People's Struggle to Slow-down the "Growth Machines"

Restaurant Owner's Struggle for Better Compensation

When I started the fieldwork in the spring of 2010, local progressive activists in the Port district were involved in a local fight between a renter and a developer in an area which was soon to be redeveloped into a shopping center. It was after the 2010 local elections that I could observe In-Ho engaging in the conflict perhaps because the focus of my field work had been the elections. The planned site of the shopping center was just beside a railway construction. The effect of the combined public and private construction work side by side seemed to prohibit pedestrians by significantly narrowing the sidewalk and to make the area around the construction site look abandoned.

Although many people knew about the overall plan, the actual developer was not on the scene yet. The tasks of buying the land plots and demolishing the existing buildings had been outsourced to an apparently independent "execution company" (*sihaengsa*). The execution company was paying bills largely from tens of million dollar loans as a form of "project financing" which means the lenders had already lent the money based on the actual developer's whole plan. Most of the owners of the existing buildings had already left the scene after selling their properties to the execution company. Although the renters of the buildings initially refused to leave demanding better compensation from the execution company, in 2010 only one renter was still remaining at the site where she used to run a restaurant.

The reason for the renters' demand of better compensation is that, in any commercial redevelopment project, renters are almost the only party who lose money immediately because of a South Korean customary practice of "payment for the right"

(*gwonrigeum*). When planning to open a shop, one has to consider, in addition to rent payment to the property owner, a payment to the current renter as compensation for yielding the location. Such payments often mount to tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars when the prospect of making money in the location is high. Renters are willing to pay because they will be paid back with a similar amount from a succeeding renter when they leave. The problem for renters in commercial redevelopment projects is that there are no succeeding renters and the “payment for the right” is not legally recognized. From the renters’ point of view, compensation is what they are entitled to be paid. Meanwhile, from the developers’ point of view, compensation for renters is something like a gift for leaving the site peacefully. Matters are usually resolved through negotiations between the two parties. If the negotiation process does not go smoothly as renters continue to refuse to leave, developers usually choose to make the scene uncomfortable enough for the renters to want to leave by hiring security firms.

The execution company in the Port district had typically offered a small compensation which was refused by the restaurant owner while outsourcing the eviction work to a security firm. Also typically, local progressive parties and student activists joined the struggle of the restaurant owner. What was unusual was the participation of a few professional writers who sided with the renter. Their presence was partly thanks to the fact that the husband of the restaurant owner was a writer. It was also due to the fact that the issues of commercial renters had been circulated in the public after five commercial renters along with one police officer were killed during a police eviction operation on the resisting renters in 2009. The references to the 2009 incident and the larger social issues were not lost in the struggle. In fact, the references to the 2009

incident were their strategic resource. The participating writers contributed articles to newspapers to discuss urban inequality and commercial renters' problems in explaining the restaurant owner's struggle. They made the site of the restaurant a culturally rich social forum by sometimes screening independent documentary films on urban rehabilitation and inequality and sometimes by holding activist musicians' concerts. Based on this consciousness of larger social issues, local progressive parties urged the district office to intervene. The district office was reluctant to intervene and treated the dispute as one between two private parties. On the actual scene, the dispute looked like it was only between the security firm and the restaurant owner. Sporadic negotiation talks between the two parties could begin only after a renowned film director, who had nothing to do with the dispute but just happened to know some people on both sides personally bridged them.

The Port district office chose largely not to intervene perhaps because the responsible civil servants did not see any feasible benefits in such an intervention. Whatever the motivation might be, however, their inaction was more likely to benefit the stronger party: the developer in this case. One day, In-Ho got an urgent call from the restaurant that the restaurant was about to lose electricity. According to the restaurant renter, it began with the security firm's action a few months earlier. As one of the typical repertoires with which security firms make resisting renters uncomfortable, the security firm cut the electricity line to the restaurant. The security firm did not have such authority. Rather, their action amounted to illegally tampering with public assets given the official policy of the public electricity company was that electricity should be supplied as far as a concerned facility is occupied and pays the bill regardless of the legality of the

occupation. The local branch of the electricity company, however, retroactively approved the security firm's action by reporting the restaurant unoccupied. Instead of appealing directly to the electricity company, the restaurant connected electricity from a nearby construction site in an *ad hoc* fashion. The restaurant got in danger of losing electricity when the execution company sent a written warning of possible litigation against the construction company working nearby and the construction company in response informed the restaurant that they would disconnect the illegally connected electricity line from the construction site. In-Ho tried to contact the local branch of the electricity company and even the headquarter with a help from the only NA member in his party. Despite several protests and requests from the restaurant owner, the electricity company refused to restore the situation before the security firm's initial action under the litigation threat of the execution company. The district office that had oversight responsibility also chose not to intervene in the situation. It seemed that, after a series of illegal actions by both parties and the policy violation of the electricity company, only the restaurant renter paid the price.

The story did not end there, however. To make up for the disadvantage of losing electricity, In-Ho borrowed a solar electricity generator from a local environmental activist organization. In addition, an environmental lecture on clean energy was organized at the restaurant. Although the generator was not powerful enough, the restaurant could acquire a symbolic significance of environmentalism as well as unexpected support from local environmental activists.

Later after my fieldwork ended, the dispute was resolved as the execution company agreed to help the restaurant renter get another site nearby. The reluctant district

office joined the agreement signing ceremony as a third party to the effect of making the agreement more public. It is hard for us to evaluate how successful the renter's struggle was since both parties agreed not to disclose the detailed agreements. What is clear, however, is that her struggle against the powerful company was sustained by pulling human and material resources together through sometimes unexpected interpersonal ties, even when public institutions with enough authority were reluctant to intervene. The writers, the film director, the musicians, the NA member, and many other local activists connected with their social ties helped the restaurant renter keep going on to see her problem more or less resolved peacefully by giving her what they had and were willing to share to the extent that the district office could not just ignore in the end. It was their contributions that made the seemingly abandoned site a place for active interaction among various people.

Organic Farmers' Resistance against a National Government-led Construction Project

Sometimes, the urban community activists found themselves taking actions unexpectedly in rural areas. As we have seen above, the sites of activism were not randomly chosen. Rather, they were connected through social ties. One early summer night in 2010, activists from various groups in the Port district were holding a preparation meeting for the upcoming "agricultural area action" (*nongchon hwaldong* or *nonghwal* in short) under the theme of "Ecotopia" in a large room at the Basecamp. Some environmental activists were organizing the action and the Basecamp decided to participate with willing members.

The organizers briefed the rest on how to get to the location, the general shape of the camping site, what to bring including rice and a bicycle and so on. “We are not going to use any chemicals because the location is a drinking water protection area and the usage of chemicals will be used to discredit the movement in the area by local opponents,” one of the organizers emphasized. The area is where the main branches of the Han River merge into one and drinking water for Seoul citizens is collected. Thanks to the beautiful scenery and close distance from Seoul, it was a tourist attraction, too. During the fieldwork, it was easy to spot billboards advertising weekend farms for urban dwellers. One of the metropolitan railways goes through the area and the railroad and stations were recently renovated.

According to the organizers, a decade or so before, a group of young activists settled in the area to experiment organic farming methods. Those farmers were in danger of losing their farms as the national government wanted to make bike paths along the river as part of its 4 major river revamping project. The farmers were against the project and some environmental activists came up with the idea of organizing a *nonghwal* while they helped the farmers’ movement. The repertoire of *nonghwal* must be familiar to those who decided to go. No one bothered to explain to others what it is. Everyone seemed to assume that I knew what it is (and I indeed knew it from my college student experiences in South Korea). For those who are not familiar with South Korean student activism in the past, the repertoire can look much like a repertoire of non-violent direct action. According to my own memories, a typical script of the repertoire was as follows: A group of students go into a village where they would stay for a couple of weeks offering labor for free to the villagers who want them. Some of the students are charged with playing

with the village children. At night, some help the secondary school students in the village study while others would drink with willing adult villagers. Towards the end of the students' stay, some villagers organize a communal party. The last day is reserved for a street rally at the central location of the area. What I observed was that the repertoire had been adapted into community activism as those students graduated.

The organizers seemed to follow the script of *nonghwal* with some modifications. Above all, the time span was necessarily shorter as they spent less than a week (4 days to be exact) for the action probably because they were no longer students. Other than working at farms, the whole program was ecologically oriented from the very beginning. For some of the participants, their entire journey to the location was exclusively on bike, which took more than four hours. I followed a group of people who decided to take the train to get there. Along the way, we found that, in principle, bikes were not allowed on the metropolitan subway system. A subway station staff who had initially blocked us somehow decided to look the other way after noticing our perplexed faces. He advised us not to be noticed by limiting the number to only one or two per car. Their life on the location was even more interesting. Within the camp site for some thirty people, electricity was not used except on one occasion when they watched a documentary film on the farmers' struggle. They cooked food with wood, a non-fossil fuel source. Their diet was entirely vegetarian.¹¹⁴ Some of them were entirely on a raw food diet. Any soap or detergent was not used. The food storage was aided by the cold spring water of the location. The know-hows such as wood burner making or bicycle maintenance were

¹¹⁴ During the time, I shuttled back and forth between where I lived and the location, which, I think, was a kind of privilege reserved for the "researcher." On one occasion, I brought some "outside food" to the people I had known at the Basecamp. When I gave them some pan-fried tiny anchovy, they were half-jokingly happy about the "protein diet."

taught to others in various workshops.

The farms we worked were a thirty-minute bike ride away from the camping site. Our bike ride proceeded somewhat dangerously along fast-moving vehicles. At the farms, some of us harvested summer vegetables. It seemed that the farmers were short-handed because of their struggles against the government and the construction companies. My group's task was clearing vinyl sheets, which are widely used in South Korea to prevent moisture evaporation and to minimize weeds, from the surface of a land plot where unharvested radishes were left rotten. The farmer told us that he wanted the work done because the plot was borrowed and he felt sorry for the owner. After he told us what to do, he went to the bike path construction site to protest. When it rained, we retreated into a temporary facility set up in the place just in front of which the two branches of Han River merge. The place was full of signs, drawings, placement artworks and photos which seemed to be left by earlier visitors. In one room of the facility, we took part in a Catholic Mass service along with some outside visitors supporting the farmers. The importance of life was accentuated in the sermon and prayers which seemed to symbolically support the farmers' resistance.

The last day was reserved for a street rally at the central area with the market place and public institutions. I was told that the village heads association was also organizing a rally on the same day to show their support for the government's project. It was a typical sunny hot August Sunday. As the temperature rose, congestion caused mostly by vehicles of outside visitors turned the roads to the central area into a virtual parking lot. A number of police came out to the streets, too. Upon close examination, however, the police was not dealing with the heavy traffic. They were escorting a queue

of seemingly hundreds of cyclists outfitted with fancy, top-notch cycling gear. The bikers were heading in the direction of where we had worked for the past couple of days. I could picture, in my imagination, the bikers holding a rally with the locals in support of the construction bike paths and wondered how happy they would be if they knew that the bike paths would be built at the cost of depriving organic farmers of their land. In my imagination, because we were prevented from going and seeing what was happening there on the ground, I suspected that another rally organized by village heads was already scheduled to be held.

The activists largely remained at the central area to hold a rally. At the rally, a couple of musicians sang a song made for a protest rally against the government's 4 major river revamping project.¹¹⁵ Others danced. All together, the activists marched on the streets. The protesters were not entirely abandoned by the police, however. A couple of police officers stood near the place where the protesters gathered and watched what was going on for a while. A man with a civilian outfit also watched them for a while, made a couple of phone-calls and disappeared. On the day, the state worked differently for different groups of people. One rally was to be protected while the other was to be watched.

What happened on that day seems to suggest a couple of points to reflect on. First of all, discourses of environmentalism do not exclusively belong to the activists. As the government packaged the river revamping project as part of its "green growth"

¹¹⁵ Following is a part of relic of the song (my translation):

To be a river, [water] must flow turn after turn after turn.
For life, ripples and sand must be harmoniously combined.
(...)
Flow and flow, the water! Spread as the waves of life!
Cheer up, cheer up, the water! Flow into the sea of life!

(*noksaek seongjang*) strategy, it became clear that environmentalism in South Korea is also a field of complex contestations among variously different positions and desires. The fact that, on the day, the cyclists stood at the opposite side of the organic farmers seems to suggest that discursive struggles as to which position or desire is genuinely “green” is not sufficient. It was not clear who actually mobilized the bikers. It did not seem to be likely that the village head association alone could mobilize such a large number of bikers or police. It seems to be more reasonable to assume that the rally was coordinated at a higher level to suppress dissenting voices. If so, the historical legacies of the state-sponsored selective mobilization were helping the efficient functioning of the “growth machines.”

The second and related point is that the selective nature of the state-sponsored mobilization around the government’s project was resulting in a divided community. The area we have examined seemed to be far from an isolated incident. When I visited Moon-Su after the local elections, he was heading to a printing shop to collect a placard he had ordered earlier. His group was planning to pay a visit to another construction site of the government river revamping project. The placard was to be hung near the construction site to express their protest against the project. On the way, he told me that, on an earlier visit, some local people “threw stones at them.”¹¹⁶ It seems to be more reasonable to assume that the local people knew the outsiders’ visit ahead of time and were mobilized accordingly. If so, it is a sign that a similar kind of the divided mobilization was also going on in the community Moon-Su visited. These communal conflicts broke out as public and private development plans were implemented through such selective

¹¹⁶ I did not inquire into whether his expression was literal or figurative.

mobilizations and were sometimes escalated into an unnecessarily fierce level amidst a few pointing fingers exchanged.

(3) Building and Consolidating Social Networks

How was the local resistance against “growth machines” organized? As we have seen above, most of the community activists’ more mundane everyday operations were also conducted by solidifying existing social ties and creating new ones. Some of the connections were mediated through public institutions while some others were more private. Some ties had been established within the organizations they belonged to whereas others went beyond the boundaries of their organizations and even districts.

Building connections within Public Institutions

On an early summer day when I visited Bo-Ram, her committee was holding a meeting attended by staffers of the district public health clinic as a part of a briefing session from district civil servants as a new term begins. After the clinic staff briefed the outline of the year’s planned activities, the committee members started to ask questions. One member in her first term inquired into the possibility of expanding government subsidies for infant vaccinations. During the course of the conversation, the member seemed to be upset by the staffs’ lukewarm attitude towards her suggestion and the conversation was turning into a verbal sparring match. Bo-Ram who chaired the session intervened and obliquely defended the clinic staffs by saying that, since there is also a concern regarding medical over-treatments, more technically informed discussions would be needed in future sessions. After the session, a few members tried to appease the clinic staff by citing that

the member was in her first term in the district council. “The public clinic is the biggest ally for us within the district government, which she doesn’t know,” Bo-Ram said to me later.

Although I did not (and still do not) understand exactly what Bo-Ram meant, what I learned from my observations was that her efforts to make allies within the government were not limited to the public clinic. She had regular discussion sessions with the local branch of the national civil servants’ union, which often continued to drinking parties. She also regularly met the public maintenance workers’ union. These connections seemed to have already been during her previous term. What she did with them was consolidating the ties by listening to their concerns and trying to find solutions with her budgetary and other authority as a council member. The public workers were not the only kind of people she met. She attended a district communal party; Drinking together with her team members and other local people. I was also told that a similar meeting was to be held with local activists who wanted to expand the coverage of public health insurance.¹¹⁷

Consolidating Existing Members

As we have briefly examined in Chapter II, the Solidarity in the Mountain district planned a series of 6 strategy meetings with willing members after the electoral failure in the 2010 municipal elections. The first meeting began with a collective reflection on the history of the Solidarity. Sometimes, they invited outside speakers who are familiar with

¹¹⁷ For the activists, the recent proliferation of supplementary medical insurance options sold by private corporations in South Korea was regarded as undermining the public character of the single-payer system.

community activism from their experiences of such activism in other districts to raise relevant issues of community activism. What was especially notable in the procedure was that the second half of every meeting was filled with small group discussions among participating members. In other words, the meetings were structured to maximize the participation of members. When combined with the after-event drinking gatherings (*duitpuri*), the structure of the meeting seems to ensure that participating members know who others are and what they think more closely as well as to raise a sense of camaraderie among members.

A similar organizational strategy was observed at the Basecamp in the Port district, too. As the Basecamp had to move to another place due to a rent raise demanded by the building owner, a discussion session on moving was organized. In the meeting, members excitedly suggested a lot of ideas including realistically unfeasible ones such as running a small café within a new space given the budgetary limitation. The chief of staff who was responsible for organizing the meeting later told me in a private conversation that the meeting was not so much about getting new ideas as about making an avenue for members' participation in the moving process. Perhaps thanks to the meeting, the entire interior work in the new place was done by members' contributions of labor and money.¹¹⁸ Often, these close relationships went beyond organizational boundaries. Moon-Su, for example, privately organized a workshop with some other local activists in his district to reflect on the 2010 election results. The activists in the workshop seemed to be so close that an after-event drinking did not even have to be announced.

¹¹⁸ Later in an e-mail newsletter of the Basecamp, the chief staff jokingly writes about a member who was rumored to be in danger of being divorced because he spent too much time helping with the interior work.

New Organizing Drive

Sometimes, new connections were sought to be established based on existing connections. On an autumn day, Bo-Ram was attending a union organizing meeting for public school cafeteria workers in Seoul. An industry level labor union with other unions under the militant Korean Federation of Trade Unions and progressive parties started to organize public school cafeteria workers with the cooperation of the progressive city educational superintendent newly elected in the 2010 municipal elections. Cafeteria workers along with facility maintenance workers are mostly temps and belong to the bottom tier of the chain of command in the public school system and improving the working conditions of these workers was one of the progressive agendas of the time. The large city-wide meeting¹¹⁹ was prepared through locally organized meetings at the district level.

In the Forest district, a local meeting was held about a week earlier. On the way to the meeting, Bo-Ram told me that she asked the principals of a few schools to allow some representatives of the cafeteria workers to attend the scheduled local meeting by visiting them in person for a few days. As the meeting time got closer, workers arrived group by group. The meeting was slightly delayed as they waited for one more group to arrive. “Why don’t we start right now? We have other things to do later in this afternoon.” One worker raised her voice with some dissatisfaction. When the meeting finally started, a union organizer talked about what the union would do if it could be established. The organizer raised largely three issues: (1) an hourly rate raise, (2) providing workday lunches for the workers, and (3) prohibiting extra-work unspecified in the contracted job

¹¹⁹ It was estimated that some 500 workers and activists attended the city-wide meeting.

descriptions. “It would be good if those can be done,” said the worker who raised her voice before. After listening to the organizer’s explanation, they seemed to be quite happy to fill the union membership applications provided. In an NPP’s internal conference,¹²⁰ an activist recalled a scene at the city-wide meeting. He met a number of workers from his district and one of them greeted him by saying “please, do succeed in this for us.” In other words, some workers thought as though they were mobilized as sidekicks in the union building processes and union building was something that should be done for them by others.

Earlier on the same day when the city-wide meeting was held, I attended a picnic trip of a retail workers’ union in the Port district. It took almost three years for the union to get recognition from the employer and to conduct stable union activities. The workers’ struggle for such a long period of time was largely sustained by dedicated efforts of local activists including In-Ho. For the workers and attending activists, the picnic was an occasion for celebrating their victory in the union building a few years before. In the greeting of the union leader at the beginning of the picnic, however, she clearly showed an attitude of “we, workers are the host and you, activists are the guests.” The attitude seemed to be an expression of a trusted partnership between equals and the sense that they were in charge of their struggles. Probably, the initial attitudes of the retail workers might not be very different from those of the school cafeteria workers. Given the city educational office’s favorable attitude towards union building for school cafeteria workers, it did not seem to take such a long time for them to build their union. Whether the kitchen workers would show a similar consciousness still remains to be seen.

¹²⁰ The conference was broadcasted through the internet.

5. Coda

What are the implications of what the community activists did in our discussion of the possibility to build counter-hegemony? Under the historically bequeathed conditions of state-sponsored selective mobilization which was crystalized into the two-party domination in local politics, the local activists still found ways to sustain local struggles by mobilizing human and material resources through social ties sometimes within and sometimes outside of public institutions. The national level state was thought to embody the “imagined” nation’s glorious achievements of rapid economic development and democratization. In local politics, the sense of glorious achievements was attempted to be repeated as ceaseless cycles of development in urban built environments. In this regard, the historically specific characteristics the community activists were trained to possess as social activists under the historically specific circumstances, as we have seen in Chapter III, seemed to help the activists to organize frictions in the otherwise smooth functioning of “growth machines.”

People make social ties in the courses of social interactions which in turn entail time-honored customs and moral sense of justice. As E. P. Thompson (1966) shows, in the early phase of the Industrial Revolution, working people’s struggles were leveled against food retailers more than factory employers. According to him, it was because, while wage and working conditions were relatively well regulated by conventions, sharp hikes in food prices usually violated people’s conventional sense of fairness. The struggles of the restaurant owner in the Port district and organic farmers in the “Ecotopia” as well as what we have seen in Poi-dong in Chapter II are not very different from

Thompson's stories. What the community activists did was to help the struggles to be sustained by mobilizing human and material resources through various social ties they had been building. In this regard, although discursive reconfigurations of politics are certainly important as the Post-Marxist theory suggests, we need to keep in mind that they are just a part of the politics of resistance.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

1. Findings and Theoretical Implications

In this study, we have been trying to understand South Korean community activism by putting it in the context of historical developments in South Korea. In this section, some of the theoretical implications of the findings in this study are drawn by connecting the dots in the course of revisiting the previous chapters. Based on our discussion of findings, I try to elaborate on the relationships between socio-economic changes and political mobilization.

As the overarching questions of this study are about the relationships between socio-economic transformation and political contestation, our discussions have begun with an inquiry into the utility of some of the sociological concepts describing such large scale transformations as modernization, industrialization, urbanization and neo-liberal globalization. To what extent do such concepts help us grasp the realities on the ground in South Korea? To answer this question, a couple of important aspects need to be noted. First of all, since the early years of sociological inquiry, the discipline has constructed narratives on large scale modern transformations based on the assumption that there is one essential driving force supposedly triggering all other accompanying social changes, be it Marxian modes of production, Weberian rationalization or Durkheimian changing forms of solidarity. Second, these productions of social scientific knowledge are also historical acts, in the meaning that sociologists have struggled to capture the natures of tumultuous social transformations as their responses to the processes.

In this regard, social scientific works on South Korea is not an exception. Although social scientists paint vastly different pictures of modern transformations in South Korea depending on their ideological orientations, what they have in common is the presupposition that what they do is to elucidate the natures of social changes modern industrialization brought with a similar presumption of one essential driving force. However, social scientists are not the only kind of people who have strived to understand what has been happening around them. As we have seen in the beginning of Chapter II, the members of the Solidarity in one of the strategy meetings shared their experiences and understandings of recent social changes by tapping into sociological concepts along with the discipline's implicit narratives on modernity. The existence of such "lay" sociologists who are not afraid of using abstract concepts in part shows the extent to which social scientific discourses have pervaded, if not dominated, in the South Korean society.

There is also another way as the autobiographies of two women demonstrate. In other words, the personal stories are what Somers and Gibson (1994) call "epistemological other" to social sciences. From these stories, we have drawn a couple of points regarding the modernization processes in South Korea. First, the modernization processes differentiated rather than uniformly affected individuals living in South Korea and the differentiations allowed multi-layered points of meaning-making out of the processes. For example, while the educational system in South Korea has improved in the last half-century, the improvement has also differentiated those who have more from those who have less educational attainments. While one the main interests of social scientists is largely to know how conducive the spread of literacy was to the

industrialization out of their perception of the general improvement, the stories in the autobiographies show different points of meaning-making told from the perspectives of those who were less advantageous in the processes. The decisions not to attain formal education were made largely without knowing how disadvantageous the lack of education would be. When the school carelessly sent survey forms to students' homes without caution that their parents might be illiterate under the circumstances where illiteracy was a social stigma, one of the women coped with the difficulty with a help from her young daughter. The woman was also able to execute sewing tasks in a factory even better than her literate co-workers. The ultimate point the women make in their auto-biographies seems that they survived through provisionally formulated coping repertoires despite their lack of literary competence. A similar contrast can be made around the topic of migration. While social scientists focus their attentions largely on spatial rearrangements of labor forces, the women tell us stories of miserable living conditions and new interpersonal, sometimes pleasant and sometimes bitter, relationships they made in the new urban environments. In other words, new urban residents built their own urban villages which were not just remnants of traditionalism but also products of modern urban conditions of concentration of poor population in areas without proper infrastructures.

Second, the differentiations often caused symbolic contestations among people with various social positions as the results of the differentiations. As a sister of one woman insisted to go to school against their parents' preference, she seems to engage in a cultural contestation over the issue of education attainment, probably trying to protect her social life at her school. In the eyes of the woman who tells the story, however, her

sister's insistence is interpreted as her desire to avoid household chores which the woman faithfully did. As the woman got older, she perceives people like her sister as someone she looks up to. She engaged in her own symbolic struggles to be such a respectable person by starting her own education at her old age out of desires to be educated. The desire was strong enough to help her get over the shame of revealing her illiteracy. In sum, modern industrial transformations produced multiple points of meaning-making by people differentiated during the processes of transformations. And, people's coping repertoires, such as relying on communal cultures, in the processes were hybrid by nature because the repertoires were provisionally formulated out of readily available resources, like helping hands from neighbors, rather than determined by some epochal logics of modernity such as impersonal commoditized transaction.

This insight about modern industrial transformations is useful for us to understand the complexity of the neo-liberal globalization processes. In larger pictures, the neo-liberal globalization left indelible marks on the urban landscapes of Seoul as global financial forces dominated the processes. The city center is filled with buildings of financial and informational firms and has turned into a tourist theme park-like ahistorical space. Public land is given to private developers under the rationale of increasing real estate values. In other words, Seoul is increasingly becoming Sassen's global city (2001), Davis's city of quartz (2006[1990]) or Moody's neo-liberal real estate regime (2007) through the processes of what is called "Disneyfication" (Dear 2005) and what Harvey calls accumulation by dispossession. In a close examination, however, such neo-liberal transformations have their own multiplications. For example, the IMF mandate to maintain high interest rates has provided, with aid from the central government and

National Assembly members, a fertile ground where locally based lending industry has proliferated, often entailing quasi-criminal practices. At a different level, even time (one of the most important hallmarks and universalized anchors of human perception) flows with different social significance for such differentiated people as Zygmunt Bauman (1998: 18-19) keenly observes. Just as one member of the Solidarity felt that ordinary people had been left behind in the processes of rapid socio-economic transformations, the incidents in Poi-dong demonstrate an uneasy co-existence of differentiated flows of time: the increasingly accelerated pace of real estate development versus the lasting legacy (the forcefully made concentration camps of vagabonds) of military dictatorship which has been long gone. In the course of implementing a public land development plan, the affluent district government refused to recognize its poor *de-facto* residents who became an obstacle of the development plan just by living in the would-be construction site. When the poor residents were engulfed by a disaster of conflagration, the district government even sent thugs to destroy what remained after the disaster. These actions are not something necessarily deduced from the logics of neo-liberal globalization. Rather, these actions are the results of cooperation and confrontations among various local actors as Logan and Molotch (1987) as well as Merrifield (2002) show. For this reason, we need to take the necessity and possibility of politics seriously in our discussion of neo-liberal globalization.

Our activists (In-Ho, Bo-Ram, and Moon-Su) are among those who believe that (local) politics can make a difference. However, their activism is far from a spontaneous and immediate response to the neo-liberal transformations. Rather, the activism was enabled by community activists who emerged under historically specific circumstances.

Our activists were born in the first half of the 1970s when new urban villages were formed around the Seoul area as a result of the rural to urban migration facilitated by the rapid industrialization. As teenagers, they developed moral senses of social injustice, inequality and oppression by public authorities through their experiences. In addition, the second half of the 1980s was a tumultuous period when anti-government resistance was visible to these teenagers. In-Ho lost a student activist friend of his brother who was loved by him. During the nation-wide teachers' union disputes, Moon-Su had to see one of the teachers he respected leave the school. In Bo-Ram's mind, a student movement leader became an admired star along with the more usual ones such as basketball players.

Their moral sensibility was expressed as social activism after they graduated high school. Places like night schools, university student associations and university private clubs had been formed to forge young activists with radical political orientations from the second half of the 1980s on. When our activists were young adults in the early 1990s, such organizations still trained mostly college students in their early 20s into social activists. Perhaps except for the case of In-Ho, our activists did not pursue activist careers from the beginning. At a personal level, their contacts with the activist cultures of that time were part of their attempts to adapt to new university environments where students socialized with others through Student Associations (SAs) and private clubs. Their "night life" such as the after-event drinking party (*duitpuri*) culture provided them with a sense of communal bonds, where circulated discourses happened to be dominated by radical ideologies. In other words, like the women in their autobiographies, our activists provisionally utilized readily available repertoires of college students of that time without exactly knowing the consequences. The significance of university student

organizations as an activist producing mechanism, however, does not necessarily mean that our activists became Leninist vanguards as in the 1980s. As the democratic transition continued under Kim Young Sam government and a sense of consumerist abundance was spread among the younger generation (Abelmann 1996: 226-236), SA movements started to engage in practical concerns of college students such as tuition inflation and student welfare expansion along with militant political slogans that characterized the student activism in the 1980s. Bo-Ram assumed a role of providing welfare services to students as the head of the SA welfare committee after her reinstatement into the university during the Kim Dae Jung presidency. Furthermore, similar changes came at the personal level, too. During his compulsory military service, Moon-Su became doubtful about the efficacy of militant political slogans and violent methods of student movements of that time. Instead of going back to campus after being discharged from military service, he devoted himself to a night school as a new venue of social activism.

After graduation from their respective universities, our activists found new sites of their activism in local politics largely thanks to the emergence of the progressive Democratic Labor Party (DLP) and its engagements in elections. However, their transitions from student movements to community activism were far from something arranged by the DLP or other comparable national centers as a carefully designed political program. Rather, unexpected requests from their personally connected people played important roles in their getting involved with community activism. In-Ho became a leader of the Port district progressive community activism when he was nominated as an NA member candidate by the DLP in his early thirties. The candidacy was something unexpected for him when he had begun to search for a suitable candidate. Similarly, when

Bo-Ram was not sure about what to do next after graduation, an unexpected phone-call led her to an activist career mediated through the local DLP organization. Moon-Su's story also shows similar unexpected turns in his activist career. When he decided not to go back to campus after military service, he settled in at a night school largely because it was run by his close acquaintance. When he about to leave South Korea to travel, something he had planned for a while, he was requested to help with an election campaign. And his involvement in the campaign led him to a position at the Solidarity. When seen from the ground, these rather fortuitous turns of events were important parts of the seemingly coherent stories of the political movements of the DLP and other community activism which have largely emerged from the late 1990s on. When Bo-Ram's heroic resistance against existing practices of local politics received favorable attention from the national as well as local media, the political successes were largely due to her ability to provisionally formulate suitable responses out of student movement repertoires acquired in her past activist experiences. Although the DLP advertised that she was a "typical" progressive politician, the typicality did not mean that she followed a well-established political program of the DLP for local politics. Rather, she was more of a pioneer in an uncharted territory of local politics, who sets examples to be emulated by others. In a sense, she was exceptionally lucky as she recalled ("I had several once-in-a-decade political chances during my first term.").

Whereas our activists were veering from the totalizing revolutionary ideologies they absorbed in the early 1990s toward down-to-earth community concerns (waste collection fees for Bo-Ram and pet health care for In-Ho, for example), some vestiges of their past movement experiences were visible in their everyday repertoires of community

activism. First of all, the basic unit of their community activism was a small group of very close like-minded colleagues. Their interpersonal bonds were solidified through frequent conversations on public as well as personal issues. The *duitpuri* culture they retained from the past seemed to enhance such close relationships even further. Second, because our community activists acquired their radical ideas largely through discussions on reading materials, they were not afraid of using abstract legal and theoretical language in interpreting social phenomena as well as in giving meanings to what they did. Such literary aptitude was helping them to readily engage in public institutions where legal language is commonly used and to adopt terminologies of new social movements such as feminism, environmentalism, and grass-roots movements in expressing themselves. Because of the historicity of their emergence as community activists and the continuity and discontinuity from their past movement experiences, labeling them with the seemingly self-evident term of “progressive” is less than informative in understanding who they are, what they do, and how they do it. In addition, from our activists’ idiosyncratic life stories, as we have detected, there emerges a pattern of becoming engaged in community activism. The right institutions at the right time seem to be crucial to their beginnings as community activists. It seems, however, that their personal connections they had built in the institutions were more important than the existence of such institutions. Their life stories were in fact full of such personal ties entangled with what they did and, without such social ties, they might have gone down a different path. In a sense, they were living with their own paces of time, quite distinct from the ever-accelerated neo-liberal time and, because of their distinctiveness in temporality, capable

of organizing political frictions among different rhythms in the flow of time just like the poor residents in the Poi-dong shantytown.

These relational characteristics of community activism were, as we have seen, also visible in the processes of the local elections. Whereas the “birds-eye” views of liberal democracy and democratic transition theories treat election largely as an instrument of power structure change, our “street view” examination of elections has detected social processes in which building social ties looms large. In the “birds-eye” view, elections are theoretically postulated to be an opening (the “institutionalized uncertainty”) in which political power changes hands among various political forces through the competition of their political discourses and policies under more or less fair conditions. As we have seen in Chapter IV, the actual election processes on the ground were involved with a lot more than political discourses and policies, and such “extras” had important effects on election outcomes. In the processes, for example, campaign repertoires were largely standardized by (or even as) commercial products. For the progressive community activists, one of the implications of the inseparable presence of commercial goods and services in historically accumulated campaign repertoires was that, largely due to the progressives’ lack of financial resources, the playing field was skewed towards resourceful candidates largely from the two major parties of the GNP and the DP and the bias made the progressives’ already marginal political positions even worse.

The fact that most of the campaign repertoires were ineffective in communicating political discourses that highlight competing policy options during the elections compels us to be more skeptical about the theoretical assumptions of the liberal theories although the candidates were firm believers in such liberal theories. Street

campaign repertoires may better suit a theorization that perceives the campaign repertoires as parts of political rituals or festivals than as rational conversations on political discourses. First of all, what the liberal theories ignore is the fact that, as the maps on the walls of the campaign headquarters symbolize, campaign repertoires on the ground took place mostly in concrete physical built environments of the city, rather than abstract discursive fields. For the progressive candidates, physical spaces were to be experienced, understood as well as acted upon, and the processes were time-consuming, not to mention physically and mentally exhausting. In this regard, the candidates were much more than the Baudelairean (or, more sociologically, Simmelian [1971]) *flaneurs* who appreciate the impersonality of modern urban spaces with the typical detached distances. Through countless repetition of the standardized repertoires which are, at best, dubiously rational, most of the campaign repertoires constitutes of political rituals in which the participants attempted to incarnate an authority of higher order, namely the people's will by making numerous intersubjective connections.

The relational nature of elections is not limited to campaign repertoires. Whereas strong connections to local interpersonal networks made the GNP “mysteriously” powerful, the progressives’ weak social ties made them easy targets in the elections. Many of the campaign staffs and election observers were recruited from those tied to local political forces. In other words, the staff positions were filled in social network building processes between the progressives and local residents. However, as In-Ho’s failure to recruit a campaign staff reminds us, building social ties does not happen overnight but takes place over a relatively long period of time by building trust in the processes. That is why some social ties are on sale in elections but the progressives were

not willing to take such a shortcut. The progressives' weak positions in local networks (partly because they were relatively young and new actors on the local scene) made a campaign with strong emphases on responsible campaign platforms largely a "gleaning" process. In other words, what the liberal theories perceive as the norm was a kind of sidekick in practices on the ground. Although the idea that votes need to be gathered into one basket for an effective and meaningful "gleaning" was widely shared among progressives, the unification processes were not always smooth because factional considerations always came into play. The frequent failures of unification do not indicate that the progressives are particularly selfish but that politics is a delicate affair. In addition, the actions of the major parties' candidates, who also played their own delicate political games, made the election campaigns far more complex.

On the surface, an election appears to happen during the two-week official campaign period. In actuality, however, the two weeks are merely a period when the efforts to create and consolidate social connections are attempted more intensely than usual. And, when it comes to making meaningful relationships, a quick fix rarely exists. If elections can be analogously compared to an electric switch, it can be said that, in the imagination of the liberal theories, a simple flip can bring democracy on and off. In this reasoning, the switch is to be held responsible when democracy is not on instantly. What we, along with our community activists, have found is that there is no such a switch to turn democracy on with a simple flip. Rather, election is closer to a political ritual or festival where participants show off what they have been cultivating for a longer period of time.

Precisely because of this time-consuming nature of politics, a thoroughly democratic consensus building, if such is possible at all, among various voices of people who are differentiated during the courses of socio-economic transformations is likely to appear to be very inefficient in achieving certain political ends in a given political community. Meanwhile, the formality of liberal democracy is a reason why politics can be efficient because, largely through elections, a hegemonic political force can bypass the consensus building and pretend to incarnate the general will of the people. In other words, in order for a sense of political unity to appear to be complete, only a certain sizable portion of the people needs to be mobilized under a hegemonic narrative as far as vocal protesters with different narratives can be effectively isolated and suppressed. In this regard, political subjectivity is formed in the very political processes of hegemonic mobilization and suppression rather than as an expression of certain pre-political characteristics of individuals such as economic class. As far as state lies at the core of such political processes, the state is always-already implicated in the political alignment formations of (civil) society. At the same time, the more efficient a certain political community attempts to be in achieving political ends of the hegemonic force by circumscribing delicate and time-consuming political processes, the more hollow (or even nominal) the integrity of the political community becomes. Under this condition, any attempt to represent the political community as something without political fissions is destined to be ideological as well as utopian in the Mannheimian sense (Mannheim 1936: 40; Jameson 1981: Chapter 6). It is ideological when the notion of wholesome community is used to repress dissenting voices. It is utopian when the excluded claim their inclusion relying on the same notion of wholesome community. In this regard, what

Laclau and Mouffe view as the “necessary” incompleteness of any identity formation is not the underlying logic but a symptom of the danger in the hegemonic selective mobilization and suppression of dissidents, which seems to be innate in the formality of liberal democracy.

The historical experiences during the rapid socio-economic transformations in South Korea seem to point to such danger of exclusion and suppression of protestors in liberal democracy. The socio-economic transformations which can be characterized by massive geographical and occupational rearrangements made a predominantly agrarian South Korea into a typical urbanized industrial country in just a few decades. Along with the socio-economic transformations, as we have examined the political alignment in Seoul in Chapter V, South Korean politics has evolved into liberal democracy, something so typical in this neo-liberal era, where two more or less similar parties compete each other largely for the sake of retaining power, certainly not without some ideologically distinct minor parties which are fighting for their political relevance. And, more or less the same “pragmatist centrist” policies are pursued, regardless of which party is in charge and what political rhetoric is used to paint their political opponents, and supposedly “centrism-oriented” voters are the targets of major parties’ political appeals. No political parties have control over their electoral fortunes. However, the election results changes drastically not because of centrist swing voters but because of the unique combination of the tenacious but hardly expanding Grand National Party (GNP; Saenuri Party at the time of writing) base and the whimsical Democratic Party voters. Although each party claims to represent the whole nation, the rhetoric of unity barely prevents corrosive rhetorical

exchanges of blows which make political divisions between the two major parties seemingly unbridgeable.

Interestingly, economic class is less meaningful in such political divisions than many social scientists would expect to be. The political mobilizations seem to have their own historical rhythm and momentum rather than instantly reflect the economic class structure. At a deeper level, however, both the socio-economic transformations and political mobilizations share the same repertoire of state-sponsored selective mobilization. Socio-economic and political differences created by rapid socio-economic transformations have been rolled over by the ideological juggernaut of national unity and modernization just as the believed-to-be-sacrosanct village hill was flattened by a bulldozer lent from a state-owned company under the ideology of anti-superstition. In this processes, real and imaginary threats of “commies” were constructed by the state to suppress vocal protesters, some of whom actually became socialists of various sorts. The counter-hegemonic narrative of the South Korean historical development was created and spread by intellectuals and student movement circles under this historical circumstance of political repression. In the counter-narrative, real and imaginary threats of “reactionaries” were believed to retard the Historical destiny of Korea as an autonomous unified nation although, largely under the Democratic governments, the dangerous idea of revolution was sanitized into discourses of civil society and liberal democracy. Arising from this ideological division was a strange discursive framework in which either economic modernization or democracy needs to be chosen over the other and Shin (1999) argues that South Korea needs democracy for economic development. A symptom of this political division is that the supposed national unity can be represented only with

something that does not exist, as the frequent appearances of rural scenes in political representation show.

Be it economic modernization or democratization, the rapid pace of historical changes seem to be a point of national pride. And, seen on the ground of the neo-liberal South Korea, the state seems to find its relevance largely in maintaining or accelerating the pace of development cycles so that investors can realize their profits faster than ever. The national as well as local governments seemed to be quick to act in favor of developers and to show indifference, if not outright suppression, towards vocal protesters. Just as during the G20 Summit and in “Ecotopia,” the national government coordinated local mobilization of consenting people while containing dissenting voices with police. In the Forest district, the gift of a land plot seemed to be carefully designed to pave way for a controversial condominium construction just in front of a national park area largely at the city government level just as the construction of private schools, which would deprive local people of their cherished public green land, was hastily decided, bypassing organized inputs from local people in the Port district. In the Mountain district, a public hearing proceeded without listening carefully to concerned voices. In these various ways, public political institutions ironically seemed to attempt to find ways to curtail political conversations for the sake of efficient development. In this regard, public political institutions in South Korea much resembles what Logan and Molotch (1987: Chapter 3) call “growth machine,” in this neo-liberal era, designed to accommodate the rhythms of monetary circulation.

Under this condition of governmental practices in which politics is prevented from getting in the way of development, the community activists were slowing down the

pace of development by organizing frictions to make room for reinstating, instead of getting around, politics in the process. On the surface, the rhythm of community activism appeared to be too slow even to keep up with the seemingly constantly revolving cycle of development. To be exact, however, the resistance did not originate from the community activists' actions. Just as the unpleasant political legacy of the authoritarian government in the 1980s became an obstacle of the public land development in Poi-dong, the fact that organic farms had been cultivated for a decade gave farmers the ground for farmers' resistance against the government-initiated construction project in "Ecotopia." Similarly, the time-honored practice of "payment for right" got in the way of an otherwise smoothly proceeding shopping center development plan in the Port district. People lead their lives following their own rhythm and the differences in rhythms are slowing down the paces of neo-liberal development. What the community activists were doing was sustaining the resistance coming from the rhythms of people's lives by organizing human and material resources. In doing so, the community activists attempted to force public political institutions to acknowledge that there are dissenting voices so that any meaningful political dialogue can begin. In order to do so, the community activists were seeking new social ties within and without the boundaries of public institutions and even administrative district as well as building solidarity among already connected ties.

Karl Polanyi (1957: 35-39) counters a view that politics against the Enclosure movements in England was nothing but reactionary, by arguing that the "reactionary" politics delayed the pace of the economic transformation until working people could actually enjoy the improvements brought by the Industrial Revolution. According to him, the delay was very crucial for society as a whole to avoid calamitous consequences of the

transformation. As E. P. Thompson (1966) shows, however, the “reactionary” politics was not the only social force that slowed down the pace of the Industrial Revolution. Artisans’ Jacobinism and small craftsmen’ Luddism were also parts of people’s responses to the overwhelming pace of industrialization. In this regard, the possibility of politics the community activists tried to shore up should be taken seriously despite their small minority status. At the historical conjuncture of neo-liberal transformations and democratization in South Korea, only community activism seems to seek new possibilities to go beyond the ideological and utopian political narratives of national glory. As the fact that our community activists were born into urban settings indicates, the supposed commonality of the rural origins of South Koreans is increasingly becoming distance “memories.” It does not seem to be coincidental that, especially after the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 which made the homeless population immediately visible in public, poverty is increasingly imagined against the backdrops of urban settings under the designation of “new poverty” (for example, Hankook Dosi Yeonguso [ed.] 2006: 4). If politics is to make a political community out of various kinds of diverse population in urban settings, the roles of community activism will be more important in the future. How effective community activism will be for the task, however, remains to be seen.

2. Some Limitations of the Study and Future Research

Due to the methodological choice in this study, the scope of empirical observations is necessarily limited when it comes to generalizability. Although the ethnographic approach adopted in this study has yielded detailed textures of community activism, an inquiry of three activists and their organizations is less than sufficient to have fully

informed discussions of community activism in South Korea, let alone the South Korean society. Also, this study has limitations in addressing what other actors do than the activists. In addition, the selection of relatively successful cases may lead us to a biased picture. In this regard, further research with more cases is needed to expand the scope of this study.

Besides the generalizability issues, this study does not deal with some important topics regarding community activism. The omissions do not mean that they are somehow less important than those written in the previous chapters. Rather, it seems to me that empirical data collected during the field work do not warrant a certain level of depth of analysis I would like to do and that more focused empirical research is needed. Here, I briefly discuss only a couple of issues.

One of such topics is obviously gender dimensions of community activism and local politics. In my observations, female activists were conscious of their gendered positions differently than their male counterparts. A seemingly trivial but telling instance was smoking.¹²¹ Although many female activists are habitual smokers, I never smoked with them on the streets. In other words, they rarely smoked in open public spaces. It was mostly in closed private settings that I smoked with them. It is quite contrasting to the fact that I smoked with male activists on the streets on countless occasions. Even, it seemed that males were supposed to smoke outside perhaps due to widespread anti-smoking drives in South Korea at the time. And, it did not seem to me that males were particularly showing off their masculinity with the fact that they could smoke freely in

¹²¹ During the field work, I enjoyed smoking with activists because smoking breaks were good occasions for interesting conversations (what else can we do while smoking?). The short span of smoking time was very informative for me because various unexpected topics were broached by my smoking partners.

open public spaces. The gendered smoking practices tell us that females were more a conspicuously gendered being in community activism. However, females' gendered existence was not always disadvantageous. During the election, Bo-Ram and another candidate in the Port district attempted to make their femininity (especially, motherhood) to their advantages as shown in the catchphrase of "mom district council member." The underlying rationale seems to be that women, as care-givers and home-makers, can do better in district affair management. When this emphasis on motherhood is taken together with the gendered smoking practices, gender politics appears to be revolving around the old cultural stereotypes of "respectable women." As always, however, the issue is more complicated than that. While citing motherhood, they equally emphasized their professional competence. As district council members, they advocated public gender awareness education among male adults in their respective districts. The concepts of gender roles seemed to be under construction and contestation around the seemingly polarizing issues of the universality of humanity and the particularity of womanhood just as Joan Scott (1996) show with European experiences. Regarding this complex gender dynamics, this study needs to be supplemented with future research.

Another topic that I feel is important but missing in this study is the question of cultural translation. Although we have discussed that the historical experiences of hegemonic mobilizations worked to form an apparent uniformity of political narrative by suppressing various other narratives, the fact that South Korea has been taking seemingly universal path of modern nation state cannot be explained by selective mobilizations alone. Just as South Korean firms imported outdated production facilities and raw materials to assemble industrial products for exportation during the industrialization

processes, age-old European and North American political institutions were imitated to produce a South Korean version of liberal democracy which is ready to be exported. In this regard, the historical trajectory of counter-hegemonic social movements is not an exception. The adoption of Leninist vanguardism in the 1980s cannot be understood without considering the historical experiences of post-colonial Third World nationalist wars (especially, Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions) in the earlier periods. The image that “enlightened” intellectuals organize “backward” mass prevailing the 1980s has been largely replaced by the idea of lateral network building among local residents in the spirit of equality and solidarity in the discourses of community activist circles. The resonance between this change and the celebration of NGOs, local initiatives, and public-private partnership in recent international development discourses does not seem to be accidental. Members of the Solidarity in the Mountain district found inspiration in Brazilian cases where they advocated more citizens’ participation in the district government’s budget determination process. In-Ho modeled the Basecamp in the Port district after similar century-old practices in southern and northern European countries and actually paid a visit to these countries during the period of my field work. The community activists tended to be hungry for viable new models for their activism and informed discussions were frequently ensued among the activists. However, the translation is more than transplantation or assimilation. In her study of “translated modernity” of China in the early 20th Century, Lydia Liu (1995: 32) argues that translation is rather cultural confrontation “where the irreducible differences between the host language and the guest language are fought out, authorities invoked or challenged, and ambiguities dissolved or created.” If Liu is right, the translations of activist repertoires are more than simple

adoptions of ready-made toolkits. Based on this insight, future research will be pursued on how cultural, political, and social contestations are ensued among various actors in local communities, with what kinds of translated knowledge and activist repertoires.

APPENDIX A

THE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR THE POST-ELECTION INTERVIEW

Part I. Youth and Previous Movement Experiences

- (1) Could you tell me what the circumstances of your childhood were like? Do you think these experiences affect what you are doing now and what you would like to do in the future? If so, how?
- (2) Could you briefly tell me about the periods of secondary and higher education? Could you tell me, with some details, about some more memorable events? Could you tell me about some events which have some influences on what you are doing?
- (3) Do you have previous movement experiences before what you are currently doing? Do you think the previous experiences have any bearings on what you are doing and what you would like to do in the future?
- (4) Have you ever had, in your mind, any watershed moment in the course of your activist career? If so, could you tell me about it? In what specific aspect did your perspective on social activism change?

Part II. Election Processes

- (1) Could you tell me about your assessment of the general results of these elections? What are the most important factors to determine the results?
- (2) I would like to ask you about the election you managed. When reflecting on the result, through what channels, do you think, you received votes? What were the shortcomings you had when compared with other party candidates?
- (3) How did you mobilize election expenses? If you had more money to be spent, do you think, you would get a better result? Why or why not?
- (4) How did you recruit paid and non-paid staffs? If you could do it over again, what are the points you would change?
- (5) To what extent do you think you campaign platforms were more progressive and reformist than other candidates? In what aspects do you think progressive candidates can be distinguished from the DP candidates most? In what aspects do you think some future changes will be necessary?
- (6) What impacts do you think the election result will have on what you are planning for your community activism?

APPENDIX B

THE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR THE FINAL INTERVIEW

1. Questions about the Changing Natures of South Korean Progressive Social Activism

(1) After the 1990s, South Korean progressive social activism has been grouped into minjung movements and civil society movements. Do you think such grouping is still meaningful today?

(1-1) If so, to which group is your activism closer? Why?

(1-2) If not, from when do you think such grouping became less meaningful? How would you classify social activism? What is your assessment of the groups?

(2) To what extent do you agree on the statements below?

(2-1) For the current progressive social movements, there exists no catchword such as minjung for the social activism in the 1970s and 1980s.

(2-2) The decline in the mobilizing power of the idea of minjung and the collapse of the socialist bloc together caused the weakening or collapse of social activism with utopian aspirations.

(2-3) The difficulties you are facing in your current activism can be explained by the conceptual weakening of minjung and disappearance of utopian aspirations.

(2-4) In the current social activism, there is a general tendency that individualized and within-system reforms are preferred, as the goal, to general societal revolutions of the 1970s and 1980s.

(2-5) Under the Democratic governments, political benefits were concentrated to a few within the power-holding circle as social movements in the 1970s and 1980s are conceptualized as the “democratization movement.”

(2-6) Recently, a political coalition among opposition parties has been sought under the general consensus of welfare expansion. This coalition building reflects the tendency described with above 5 statements.

3. Questions about your community activism

(1) Current community activists seem to be in their 30s or older. What is your assessment of the possibility to recruit younger people more into community activism?

(2) If South Korean society faces political openings similar to currently ongoing “Arab Spring,” what would you do as a progressive community activist?

(3) A few more locality specific questions.

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